

CVS Decks & Docks Issues Seawall Guidance as Lake Levels Fall

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CVS Decks & Docks has issued guidance for waterfront property owners on how ground conditions behind a seawall affect the structure, following a year in which Central Florida recorded some of its lowest rainfall totals and lake levels on record.

Orlando has run more than fifteen inches below its average rainfall through late July, and lake levels across the region have dropped well below normal. The shoreline that has been submerged for years is now exposed, and portions of seawalls and dock pilings that ordinarily sit underwater have become visible from the bank.

The conditions have created an unusual window for assessment. Structures built at a typical water level are now standing in open air at their base, where wear concentrates and where inspection is normally impossible without entering the water.

Soil is the variable most property owners overlook when planning shoreline work. The United States Department of Agriculture publishes soil survey data through its Web Soil Survey, available to the public down to the parcel level, including soil composition, drainage class and depth to the seasonal high water table. That information is available before a project begins rather than after.

Much of the Orlando metropolitan area sits on sandy, well-drained soils along the Florida Ridge, a landscape the Florida Geological Survey classifies as karst. The designation describes terrain shaped by soluble limestone beneath the surface, which influences how water moves through the ground and how the ground responds when that water is removed.

Sandy ground drains readily, and that characteristic shapes how a seawall is loaded. Water moving through loose soil can carry fine material with it. When that material migrates through a gap or a failed joint, it leaves

voids behind the wall rather than settled ground, and the surface above those voids can sink without any visible change to the wall itself.

Common practice addresses this with a filter fabric installed behind the panels, allowing water to pass while holding soil in place. Drainage is designed to relieve pressure rather than let it accumulate. Neither element is visible once construction is complete, which is part of why they are frequently underestimated by property owners comparing quotes.

Denser, clay-bearing soils behave in the opposite way. They retain water, which builds pressure against the back of a wall, and they expand and contract through wet and dry cycles. A wall installed without drainage in those conditions carries a load it was never intended to hold.

Where limestone sits near the surface, standard piling methods may not apply. Pre-drilling can be required before pilings are set, which affects both the equipment brought to a site and the sequence of the work.

"When the water drops this far, the part of a wall nobody ever sees is sitting right there in the open," said Camille Asmar, Co-owner of CVS Decks & Docks. "The ground behind a seawall tells you more about how it will perform than the panel material does."

Drought introduces a second consideration. Soil that has been dry for months consolidates differently than soil that remains saturated, and the transition back to heavy rainfall is when weaknesses behind a wall tend to surface. Water returning to a shoreline finds whatever paths have opened during the dry period.

The same conditions affect dock structures. Pilings wear fastest at the waterline, and a sustained drop in lake level exposes a section of each piling that has been submerged since installation. Fasteners and hardware, which corrode faster than the framing they hold together, become reachable for inspection at the same time.

Falling water also changes how a dock functions. A fixed structure built for a typical water level may no longer reach usable depth, and a boat lift positioned for one elevation is operating relative to another.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has forecast a below-normal Atlantic hurricane season for 2026, citing El Niño conditions expected to persist through the fall. The agency has noted that its seasonal outlook describes overall basin activity and is not a landfall forecast, and the historical peak of the season extends into October.

"A seasonal forecast describes the whole basin, not one shoreline," Asmar said. "The condition of the structure is what determines the outcome on a given property."

Property owners assessing shoreline structures during low water can look for gaps opening at panel joints, low areas or sinking pavers near the wall, movement in the cap, and soil that has pulled away from the back of the structure. On docks, split or softened boards and corroded hardware are visible indicators of conditions developing below the surface.

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