Invasive vines assault East Coast beaches.

By Oren Dorell, USA TODAY. October 16, 2009.

A fast-growing vine imported from Korea to stop massive erosion of sand dunes — home to sea turtle hatchlings and such shore birds as plovers — is destroying dunes in the Carolinas and threatens to creep into beaches up and down the East Coast.

The beach vitex, a woody plant with waxy leaves and a pretty purple flower, was planted widely along the Carolina coast after Hurricane Hugo ravaged beaches and dunes in 1989.

States wanted to act fast because, aside from being a nesting site for shore birds, dunes help hold back storm waters.

The vine proliferated, but there were unforeseen consequences. The plant's thickness harms nestlings, and its shallow root system fails to hold dunes together.

"They really flubbed it on this one," said Randy Westbrooks, an invasive-species prevention specialist for U.S. Geological Survey.

Beach vitex was promoted by J.C. Raulston, then-director of the North Carolina State University arboretum, because it thrives on nutrient-poor, sandy soils and grows fast. With an average growth rate of 60 feet a year, the vine can completely cover dune systems, said Melanie Doyle, a horticulturist at the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher.

Betsy Brabson, an artist and sea turtle advocate in Georgetown, S.C., said beach vitex with all its vines and runners creates such a tight network that sea turtles can't nest.

"I don't want something like beach vitex to cover the dunes for miles and miles and then we have no sea turtles," said Brabson, who heads the South Carolina Beach Vitex Task Force.

And, unlike the native sea oats and other grasses that people are used to seeing on dunes, beach vitex doesn't help dunes grow into a high barrier against storm surges, Doyle said.

This year the North Carolina Department of Agriculture & Consumer Services declared the plant a "noxious weed," banning it from being sold or planted.
Crews have fanned out across coastal North and South Carolina to eradicate it, cutting the plants with machetes and dabbing them with a herbicide.

Indications are that the eradication may be tougher than first thought.

Isolated strands of the vine have been found in Georgia, Florida and Alabama.

Members of the Beach Vitex Task Force thought they were on the road to victory against the invader until a "real bombshell" was discovered in Maryland, said Lee Rosenberg, environmental services manager for Norfolk, Va.

This month, a U.S. Park Service biologist reported beach vitex in the Maryland side of Assateague Island National Seashore, home to about 300 wild ponies. Westbrooks suggests that the plant's seeds are transported by ocean currents.

Rosenberg said he believes migratory birds are behind the propagation.

"That means any area north and south is subject to being colonized by beach vitex just by seeds being brought by birds," Rosenberg said.

Dale Suitor, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife biologist, said the Assateague discovery rocked the Beach Vitex Task Force. "It hadn't really crossed our minds that it could be that far north," he said.

Based on an evaluation of the plant's native range, along the Pacific Rim, Suitor now thinks beach vitex might take root as far north as Rhode Island.

Instead of focusing on the Carolinas and Virginia's Eastern Shore, the task force will have to send word as far as southern New England "to keep a look out for this thing," Suitor said.

"There's lots of preserves — Fire Island National Seashore, Cape May (Point State Park), Delaware Seashore State Park — we're going to have to figure out a way to get in touch with all of them," he said.

Cape Cod received the news this week. The response: "That would be bad," said Mark Faherty, science coordinator for the Mass Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary.