

# Coastal Landslide Hazards

# York Beach Quadrangle, Maine



**Coastal landslide hazard mapping by**

**Stephen M. Dickson**

Digital cartography by:  
**Susan S. Tolman**

Cartographic design and editing by:  
**Robert D. Tucker**  
**Stephen M. Dickson**

Robert G. Marvinney  
*State Geologist*

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**Maine Geological Survey**

Address: 22 State House Station, Augusta, Maine 04333  
Telephone: 207-287-2801 E-mail: mgs@maine.gov  
Home page: http://www.maine.gov/doc/nrimc/nrimc.htm

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### Introduction

Landslides are the rapid movement of earth materials downslope under the force of gravity. Many landslides have occurred along the Maine coast in the last few centuries, and more landslides will happen in the future. Based on history and field evidence, a variety of scenarios and possible events, from large to small and fast to slow, can threaten property and, in a few cases, put human life at risk. It is not possible to predict exactly when and how large the next coastal landslide will be. Landslides have occurred frequently enough that geologic analysis and informed land use can lead to risk reduction and improved emergency response.

This map provides an introduction to understanding landslide risk and guidance on what steps to take if the risk of a landslide is a concern in a particular coastal area. Landslides can occur in high coastal bluffs composed of muddy sediment. This landslide hazards map describes the *internal* stability of sediment bluffs. A companion map, entitled *Coastal Bluffs*, describes the processes and stability of the *face* of a bluff. The coastal bluff maps provide additional information about the slope, shape, and amount of vegetation covering a coastal bluff and the adjacent shoreline. These factors are directly related to the susceptibility of the bluff face to ongoing erosion.

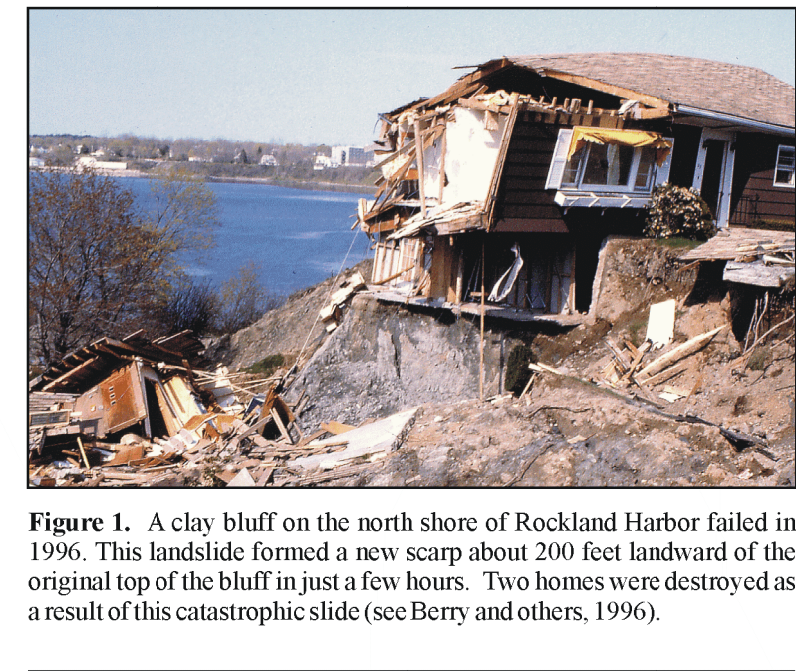


Figure 1. A clay bluff on the north shore of Rockland Harbor failed in 1996. This landslide formed a new scarp about 200 feet landward of the original top of the bluff in just a few hours. Two homes were destroyed as a result of this catastrophic slide (see Berry and others, 1996).

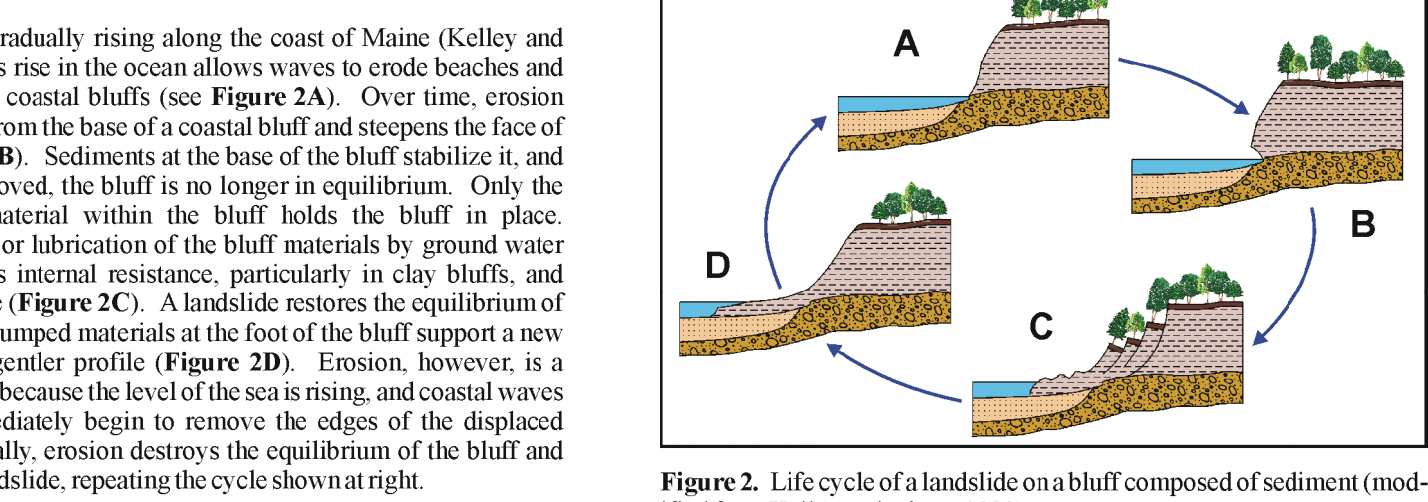


Figure 2. Life cycle of a landslide on a bluff composed of sediment (modified from Kelley and others, 1989).

### Evidence of Ground Motion and Instability on a Coastal Bluff

Careful observation of the land surface, vegetation, and shape of a coastal bluff reveals evidence of instability. Starting at the top of a bluff, an irregular or arcuate crack can indicate past landslides or at least increased coastal erosion (Figure 3). When a weak point on a bluff fails, the slide moves inward into the slope face forming a curve around the original point of failure. Tension cracks may form near a weak zone where the soil surface is moving downwards (Figure 4). These cracks appear as splits in the ground where the soil and vegetation have moved apart. Cracks may be visible along the top edge of the bluff or on the bluff face itself. On the slope of a bluff, a hummocky land surface or terraces indicate past slumping or landslides (Figure 5). Unvegetated slump scars or slopes are obvious evidence of rapid soil movement. A bowl-shaped slope often shows the location of a former landslide, with the center of the bowl as the area of greatest failure. Distorted vegetation provides evidence of soil creep or former landslides. Tree trunks curved near their base are evidence of downslope movement (Figure 6). Trees tilted at different angles are evidence of former slides or undercutting by erosion. At the base of a bluff, toppling trees and bare roots are evidence of erosion that steepens the bluff (Figure 7). Undercutting and steepening of the bluff may destabilize the slope and lead to increased erosion and possibly a landslide. Lobes or terraces of sediment in the intertidal zone are often remnants of old landslides. Although the evidence of earth movement listed above cannot predict a landslide, it is used to recognize unstable shorelines. This landform evidence is related to factors listed below that influence landslide risk.

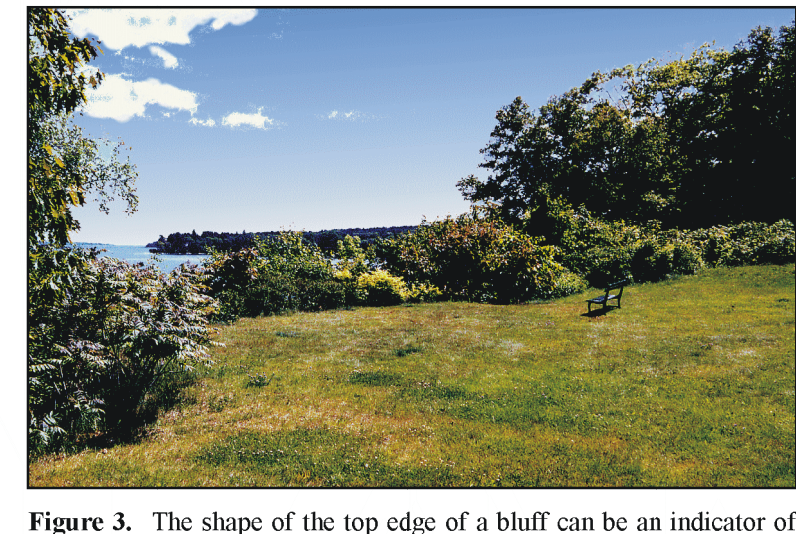


Figure 3. The shape of the top edge of a bluff can be an indicator of landslide risk. Clay bluffs often fail at points of weakness. Such a "slump" can expand into a larger landslide that cuts into the bluff and forms a curve around the original point of failure. Multiple slides and slumps will form an irregular or arcuate top edge to the bluff as shown in the photo above. Bluffs made of coarse materials or sand have a more even upper edge caused by a more constant rate of erosion along the bluff face.

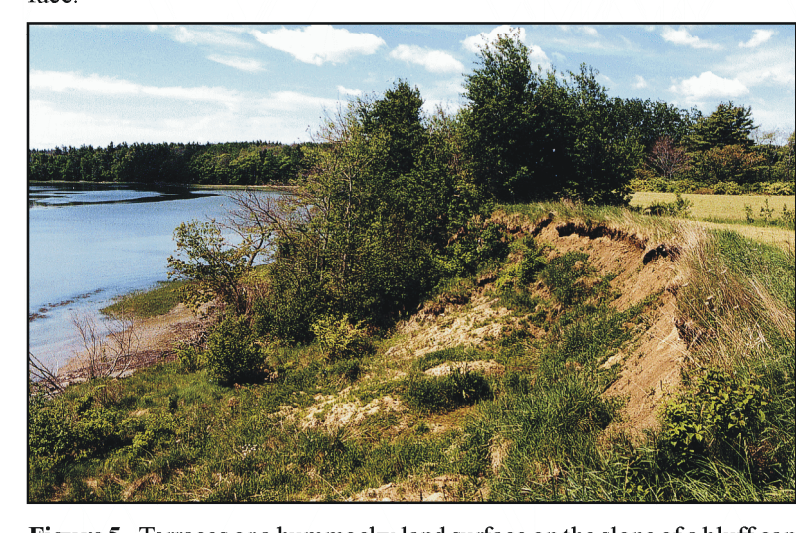


Figure 4. Downslope forces within a bluff cause surface layers to stretch. When the stretching becomes great enough, a crack forms and the pressure is released. These "tension cracks" may form on the top edge of the bluff or on the bluff slope itself. They indicate instability and motion within the bluff. Some cracks are deep and extend below the soil layer.

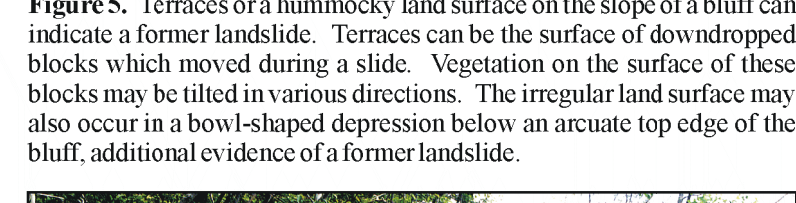


Figure 5. Terraces or a hummocky land surface on the slope of a bluff can indicate a former landslide. Terraces can be the surface of downslope blocks which moved during a slide. Vegetation on the surface of these blocks may be tilted in various directions. The irregular land surface may also occur in a bowl-shaped depression below an arcuate top edge of the bluff, additional evidence of a former landslide.

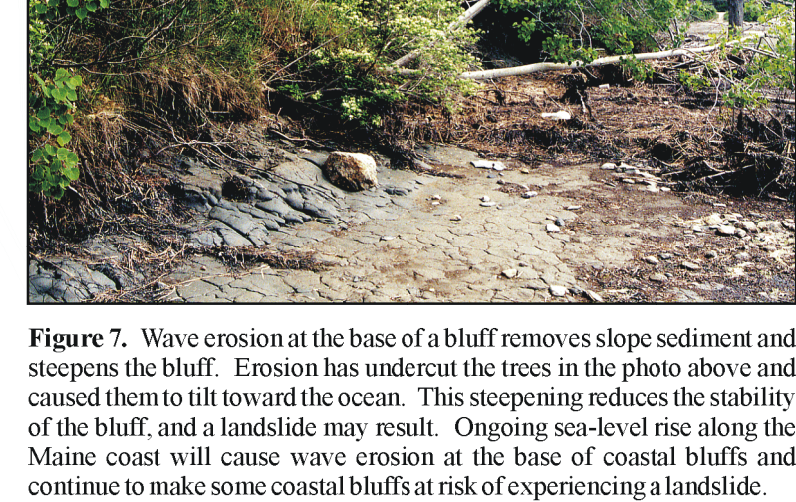


Figure 6. Soil "creep" or downslope movement of soil on a slope, will cause tree trunks to tilt toward the base of the slope. As a moving tree continues to grow, the trunk will curve as the tree tries to right itself by growing toward the sun. Landslides will also cause tree trunks to become curved.

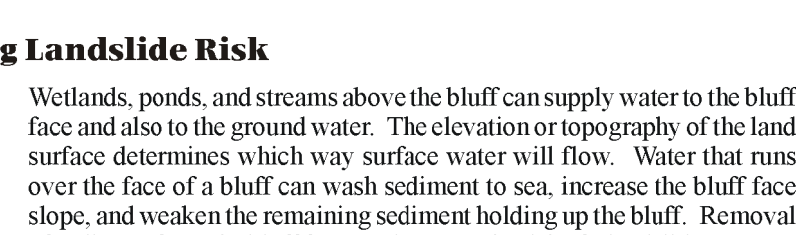


Figure 7. Wave erosion at the base of a bluff removes slope sediment and steepens the bluff. Erosion has undercut the trees in the photo above and caused them to tilt toward the ocean. This steepening reduces the stability of the bluff, and a landslide may result. Ongoing sea-level rise along the Maine coast will cause wave erosion at the base of coastal bluffs and continue to make some coastal bluffs at risk of experiencing a landslide.

### Factors Influencing Landslide Risk

#### BLUFF CHARACTERISTICS

**Height.** The height of a bluff can generally indicate landslide risk. While sediment strength depends on several factors, the thicker the sediment deposit, the more likely its weight will cause subsurface movement or slippage that leads to a landslide. The risk of a landslide increases when mud bluffs have a height of twenty feet or more. In general, the higher the exposed bluff face the greater the risk of a landslide.

**Sediment type.** Earth material that makes up a coastal bluff influences the risk of a landslide. Muddy and silt (mud) sediment is the most unstable material that can make up a bluff. These fine-grained sediments are weak and prone to moving in the form of slow-motion creep, moderate-sized slumping, or large landslides. Sand and gravel deposits tend to be steeper and better drained than muddy sediment. Landslides can occur in coarse-grained bluffs although they are less frequent than muddy landslides along the Maine coast.

**Slope.** Coastal bluffs have a relatively steep ocean-facing slope. The angle of a bluff face varies due to factors such as sediment type and rate of erosion at the base of the bluff. Slope is also affected by the history of slumps and landslides at the site. Some slopes are uniformly straight while others are terraced or uneven due to earth movements. In general, the steeper the slope, the easier it is for gravity to initiate a landslide.

**Vegetation.** Types, shapes, and distribution of vegetation above and on a bluff face can be used as an indication of site stability. In areas where the soil has sluffed, either due to previous landslides or to gradual surface creep, many tree trunks can become tilted or twisted in the same direction. Curved tree trunks near the roots often indicate land movement down the face of a bluff. Large trees on the bluff face may be moved by wind and resulting root motion may loosen bluff sediment. Natural vegetation that consists mostly of small shrubs and trees may indicate recent bluff erosion on a landslide.

**Bedrock.** Crystalline rock or ledge is much more stable than any sediment bluff and not likely to erode or slide. The elevation of bedrock at the shore and inland beneath a bluff is important in determining landslide risk. Bedrock exposures along the shoreline may slow erosion and make sediment less susceptible to landsliding. Beneath a sediment bluff, bedrock may rise toward the surface and reduce the overall thickness of sediment and thus reduce the risk of deep-seated movement below the ground surface.

#### NATURAL CONDITIONS

**Waves, tides, and sea level.** Several marine processes affect the risk of landslides along a coastal bluff. A gradual, but ongoing rise in sea level at a rate of about an inch per decade is causing chronic erosion along the base of many bluffs. As sea level rises, waves and coastal flooding can reach higher and farther inland and scour more sediment from a bluff. Sea ice erodes tidal flats and the base of bluffs by abrasion and freezing sediment in ice blocks. Erosion can increase a bluff slope and make it more susceptible to landsliding. Tides are also important in washing away eroded bluff sediment which helps waves action more inland. Storms that create wind, waves, and flooding can cause more extreme erosion at the base of a bluff, increase the bluff slope, and make a landslide more likely.

**Surface water.** The amount, type, and location of surface water can influence bluff slope stability and may contribute to some landslides.

Wetlands, ponds, and streams above the bluff can supply water to the bluff face and also to the ground water. The elevation or topography of the land surface determines which way surface water will flow. Water that runs over the face of a bluff can wash sediment to sea, increase the bluff face slope, and weaken the remaining sediment holding up the bluff. Removal of sediment from the bluff face can increase the risk of a landslide.

**Ground water.** Ground water inland of a bluff comes from surface sources, such as rain or a stream, uphill in the local watershed. Ground water tends to flow horizontally beneath the surface and may seep out the face of a bluff. Seeps and springs on the bluff face contribute to surface water flow and destabilize the bluff face. In addition, a high water table can saturate and weaken muddy sediment and make the ground more prone to slope failure.

**Weathering.** Weathering in clay and silt can change the strength of bluff sediment and stability of the bluff face. Drying of clay can increase resistance to sliding. The seasonal cycle of freezing and thawing of the bluff face can lead to slumping after a thaw.

**Earthquakes.** Landslides can be triggered by earthquakes. Ground vibration loosens sediment enough to reduce the strength of material supporting a bluff and a landslide results. Most landslides triggered by earthquakes in sediment like that found in Maine have been of Richter magnitude 5 or more. These are relatively rare events, but a few have occurred in historical times.

#### HUMAN ACTIVITY

**Land use.** Human activity and land use may contribute to or reduce the risk of a landslide. Actions that increase surface water flow to a bluff face, watering lawns or grading slopes, add to natural processes destabilizing the bluff face. Surface water, collected by roofs, driveways, patios, and lawns flows toward and down the bluff face. Walkways down the face of a bluff can lead to greater erosion from foot traffic or the concentration of surface water flow. Both surface and ground water above a bluff can be supplied by pipes, culverts, surface drains, and septic systems. Increased water below ground can weaken a bluff and contribute to internal weakness that leads to a landslide. Greater seepage of water out of the bluff face can also increase the risk.

**Clearing of vegetation from the bluff face** can lead to greater bluff erosion and a steeper bluff that is more prone to landsliding. Vegetation tends to remove ground water, strengthen soil with roots, and lessen the impact of heavy rain on the bluff face.

**Adding weight to the top of a bluff** can increase the risk of a landslide. Buildings, landscaping, or fill on the top of the bluff can increase the forces that result in a landslide. Saturating the ground with water that raises the water table also adds weight. Even ground vibration, such as well drilling or deep excavation, may locally increase the risk of a landslide.

**Shoreline engineering** in the form of seawalls, rip rap, or other solid structures is sometimes used to reduce wave erosion at the top of a bluff. In some settings, engineering can increase the rate of beach or tidal flat erosion and lower the shore profile over time. This intertidal erosion can undermine engineering and result in less physical support of the base of the bluff by natural sediment. Where engineering ends along a shore, erosion can become more adjacent properties. Engineering along a coast cannot prevent some large landslides.

In general, human activities that increase the amount or rate of natural processes may, in various ways, contribute to landslide risk.

**Data Collection and Compilation** - Analysis of aerial photographs, topographic and surficial materials maps was done by Stephen M. Dickson. GIS compilation of bluff and landslide data was by Susan S. Tolman. Field observations from small boats were made by Christopher E. Miller and Nicole A. Rainaldi, with additional analysis by Stephen M. Dickson. Historical landslide investigations to produce supporting documentation for Landslide Sites and Landslide Risk Areas were conducted by Irvin D. Novak, Stephen M. Dickson, Joseph T. Kelley, Daniel F. Belknap, Rebecca V. Smith, Henry N. Berry IV, Daniel B. Locke, Robert G. Marvinney, Richard T. Reynolds, Andrew L. Tolman, Thomas C. Sanford, and others in previous publications.

**Coastal Bluffs** - On this map, a bluff is defined as a steep shoreline slope formed in sediment (loose material such as clay, silt, sand, and gravel) that has three feet or more of vertical elevation just above the high-tide line. Cliffs or slopes in bedrock (edge) surfaces are not sedimentary bluffs and are not subject to significant erosion in a century or more, although some may experience rockfalls. Beaches and dunes do not form bluffs, except along the seaward dune edge as a result of erosion. This map does NOT identify erosion trends on beaches or sand dunes.

**Note:** The landslide hazard classification is indicated by a colored, patterned band extending landward from the shoreline (dark blue line). The width of the band does NOT indicate the distance inland that a landslide may occur. This distance is difficult to predict and will vary from site to site. The colored buffer is for illustration purposes only. Due to variations in coastal geology, not all units in the explanation below will appear on this map.

**Landslide Site** - Location of known or interpreted coastal landslide. Includes historically recorded landslides and slides interpreted from air photos.

**Landslide Risk Area** - Earth features indicate conditions that may be suitable for a landslide to occur. Features often include a steep or arcuate scarp, slump blocks, sediment lobes, or uneven land surfaces. Bluff sediments are usually muddy and twenty feet or more in thickness.

**Potential Landslide Area** - Shoreline with a sedimentary coastal bluff twenty or more feet high. These bluff areas have not had field investigations that are necessary to evaluate the risk of a landslide. However, some similar high coastal bluffs have experienced landslides.

**Low Coastal Bluff** - Shoreline with a sedimentary coastal bluff that has less than twenty feet of relief immediately adjacent to the shoreline. Some bluffs over twenty feet in height are included in this map unit if the bluff face is not steep. In general, low coastal bluffs are not at risk of failing in the form of a landslide.

**Non-Bluff Shoreline** - Coastal areas without extensive sedimentary bluffs. Corresponds to the no-bluff unit on MGS Coastal Bluff Maps.

**Unmapped Shoreline** - These sites generally are in the inland reaches of estuaries or beyond the scope of the field effort in this region.

**Who to Contact for More Information**

It is important to realize that the coast of Maine is constantly being eroded. Coastal bluffs that show no evidence of erosion today may be endangered in the future as rising sea level continues to erode sediments at the base of a bluff. If you are concerned about ground movement on a coastal bluff, contact the Maine Geological Survey for more information helpful in evaluating the characteristics of coastal property. In addition to this landslide hazard map, a companion map series entitled "Coastal Bluffs" describes the stability and characteristics of Maine's shoreline. Maps showing topography, sediment composition, ground-water characteristics, and bedrock are also available in many areas. Survey geologists will explain the content of each of these maps.

If you find indications of ground movement on your coastal bluff, you may want a professional geologist or engineer to investigate your property. To reduce the risk of a landslide, these professionals may recommend re-sloping the bluff face, diverting water flow, armor the toe of the bluff, or planting erosion-resistant vegetation.

Building or engineering on Maine's coastal bluffs are subject to the Natural Resources Protection Act and the Mandatory Shoreland Zoning Act. Permits from the Department of Environmental Protection may be required for any bluff modifications. Local Town Code Enforcement Officers will give advice on local requirements.

**Maine Geological Survey**

**Information available:** maps showing landslide hazards, coastal bluffs, surficial geology, surficial materials, ground-water, bedrock, USGS topographic maps, geologists explain maps and coastal processes

**Contact:** Maine Geological Survey at address shown in title block, or visit the MGS website and search your location.

**Geological Consultants**

**Information available:** studies of specific property; ground-water studies; soil mechanics; coring of bluff; mapping of site; risk analysis; recommendations about hazard reduction and slope remediation

**Contact:** consult local yellow pages under geologists or environmental services

**Engineers**

**Information available:** plans to reduce hazard; ground-water diversion; shoreline engineering; slope alteration; soil mechanics; risk analysis

**Contact:** consult local yellow pages under engineers - environmental or environmental services

**Maine Department of Environmental Protection**

**Information available:** information on state laws including the Natural Resources Protection Act, Shoreland Zoning, and the permit process

**Contact:** on the internet: http://www.maine.gov/dep/blw/ or phone: 888-769-1137 or 207-941-4570

**Town Code Enforcement Officers**

**Information available:** provide advice on Shoreland Zoning and other municipal requirements

**Contact:** local town office or http://www.maine.gov/local/

**Related Maps**

Miller, C. E., Rainaldi, N. A., Dickson, S. M., and Kelley, J. T., 2006, Coastal Bluffs in the York Beach quadrangle, Maine: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Map 06-59.

O'Toole, P., Clinch, J. M., and Cameron, C. C., 1999, Surficial geology of the York Beach quadrangle, Maine: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Map 99-106.

O'Toole, P. G., and Clinch, J. M. (compilers), 1998, Surficial materials of the York Beach quadrangle, Maine: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Map 98-167.

**Other Sources of Information**

American Planning Association, Landslide hazards and planning: <http://www.planning.org/landslides/docs/main.html>

Amos, J., and Sandford, T. C., 1987, Landslides in the Presumpscot Formation: An engineering study: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Report 87-1, 68 p.

Berry, H. N., IV, and others, 1996, The April 1996 Rockland landslide: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Report 96-18, 55 p.

Devine, S. C., and Sandford, T. C., 1990, Stability of natural slopes in the Presumpscot Formation, Maine Geol. Survey, Open-File Rep. 90-24, 75 p.

Kelley, J. T., and Dickson, S. M., 2000, Low-cost bluff-stability mapping in coastal Maine: Providing geologic hazard information without alarming the public: Environmental Geosciences, v. 7, no. 1, p. 46-56.

Kelley, J. T., Dickson, S. M., Belknap, D., 1996, Maine's history of sea-level changes: <http://www.maine.gov/doc/nrimc/mgs/expl/marine/facts/sealevel.htm>

National Research Council, 2004, Partnerships for Reducing Landslide Risk, National Academies Press, www.nap.edu, Washington, D.C., 131 p.

Novak, I. D., 1987, Inventory and bibliography of Maine landslides: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Report 87-3, 27 p., map (1:500,000).

Novak, I. D., 1990, Air photo reconnaissance of slope failures in the Presumpscot Formation, Cumberland County, Maine: Maine Geological Survey, Open-File Report 90-22, 4 p., map (1:50,000).

U.S. Geological Survey, USGS Landslide Hazards: <http://landslides.usgs.gov/>

**Limitations of the Data** - This map provides only general information on the overall stability of bluffs. It should not be the sole basis upon which specific land-use decisions are made. Some map information is based on visual inspection of the coast from offshore, and parts of the shoreline may have changed slightly since the field work was completed. Historical and potential landslide areas are partially based on air photos taken in the last four decades. Since the air photos were taken, land changes may have altered the map classification. Because of the map scale, shoreline characteristics are generalized into segments at least 150 feet long. It is important to realize that the

**Topographic base** from U.S. Geological Survey York Beach quadrangle, scale 1:24,000 using standard U.S. Geological Survey topographic map symbols.

Index at left shows adjacent maps in this series.

York Beach	White	Washburn
Colony	This Map	