

DREDGING ISSUE SPLITS THE SOUND

Connecticut Opinion

By Whitney Tilt

Amid sighs of relief and howls of protest, the Corps of Engineers, New England Division, has designated an open-water disposal site in Long Island Sound off Stamford. The sighs come from the permit holders in Mamaroneck, NY, who have been waiting to receive the go-ahead to dredge for more than a year. Their relief is also shared by the users of other small, largely recreational ports in Westchester and Fairfield Counties where maintenance dredging is needed to retain port and marina viability.

The howls come from Long Island where some interests fear that damage to fisheries, lowered water quality and other adverse impacts to the marine environment will result from the dumping of dredged material in the site, called Western Long Island Sound III (WLIS III).

The Long Island sentiment is shared by some fishermen on the Connecticut shore who feel that New York should keep its spoils to itself. Long Island and the fishermen exclaim "not in my backyard," while harbors in Westchester and Fairfield counties continue to silt in, bringing increased economic hardship to water users like private marine owners. Some 18 harbors, largely recreational in nature, providing more than 9,000 slips and 3,000 moorings, stand to benefit from the location of WLIS III.

These figures are conservative and do not include boats that use the dredged channels via boat ramps, nor do the statistics include many of the private yacht clubs. These boats represent multimillion-dollar business in sales, repairs, goods and services, as well as related bait and tackle revenues, and the like.

No study to date has attempted to fully equate the contribution of the boating industry to the economy of Western Long Island Sound. In addition, the boating public has one of the largest stakes in a healthy Long Island Sound: They use it extensively for sailing, fishing and relaxation. Without dredging, the recreational boating industry and associated benefits cease to exist.

Under Connecticut's Coastal Area Management efforts and New York's newly passed CZM (Coastal Zone Management) legislation, water-dependent usage of the coast is a top priority. Such uses include but are not limited to bathing, shellfishing, boating and commercial shipping. The latter two require adequate channels. Suddenly, we are back to the dredging issue.

The geological and hydrological nature of the Sound places a greater dredging burden on its north shore than on the south shore. Long Island lacks major river systems which transport sediments from upland areas to harbor basins and channels. The majority of material that accumulates in Long Island's channels is sand. Dredged sand has many uses from construction to beach nourishment.

The Connecticut and Westchester shoreline, however, is bisected by more than 75 riverine systems which together with tidal currents choke the harbors with sediments largely comprised

of fine grained material. These sediments, lacking the good engineering qualities of sand and not suitable for beach nourishment, must be disposed of in some other manner. Historically, more than 19 open-water disposal sites along with wetlands and upland areas were used for this purpose.

The birth of NEPA, the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, and subsequent court action reduced the number of open-water sites to three, with a western site to be named at a later date. Increased land values and demand have made upland disposal impractical and tidal wetlands are now recognized as extremely valuable natural areas and under rigorous protection by both New York and Connecticut.

For the last 10 years, dredging projects have proceeded only after an extensive permitting process and long delays. The result has been increased protection of the marine environment at the expense of maintenance dredging. Because of the backlog, commercial harbors have received priority over the smaller recreational harbors. As the harbors and channels silt in, the small marina owner is pressed harder and harder while nonwater-dependent users, like condominiums, stand by ready to pay big money to buy the owner out.

It is the commercial harbors (having received priority maintenance dredging) which may contain sediments contaminated by heavy metals, petroleum products and other toxic substances. These substances, byproducts of industrial processes, accidental spills and illegal disposal, become associated with and chemically bonded to the fine grained material on the harbor floor.

Several impacts are associated with dredging. The majority can be mitigated through the use of management measures while others are not fully understood and are under current study. "Short dumping," i.e., disposal of material in an area other than the designated site; loss of fishing buoys due to barge traffic, and interference with the oyster spawning season are examples of impacts that can be mitigated by existing management measures. The uptake of heavy metals into the marine food chain from contaminated material can be mitigated by capping the dredging material mound with cleaner material.

Since the major New Haven Harbor dredging project of the 1960's and the even larger New London Harbor-Thames River projects of the 1970's, the open-water disposal of dredged materials has been extensively and exhaustively studied by university scientists, government researchers and independent contractors. While short-term impacts have been observed only in the immediate vicinity of dumpsites, little or no medium-or long-term adverse impacts have been documented. And in several instances inactive dumpsites have become enhanced fisheries' habitats by virtue of their altered topography.

The dredging issue has always been fought between those who need it and those who don't. All too often, those who oppose dredging have no interest in water-dependent use of the Sound and therefore any possible adverse impact is grounds to prevent dredging.

On the other hand, the commercial users of the channels and harbors recognize the need to dredge but seldom have the time or patience to hear the other side. In the middle are those whose livelihood or recreational interest rests on both a safe channel to navigate and a clean Sound for

finfish and shellfish. The lobster fisherman, the oyster harvester and the sport fisherman are caught in the middle.

The WLIS III issue should not be made more complex than it already is. The decision rendered by the Corps of Engineers grants permission for the Mamaroneck project to dispose of approximately 60,000 cubic yards of material into the WLIS III site. In naming the site, the Corps has determined that only projects east of Throgs Neck will be allowed to use the site and then only after receiving a permit from the Corps and the State of Connecticut. In the nomenclature of dredging, the Mamaroneck material is "Class II" and clearly passes all testing criteria. Contrary to popular belief, the most contaminated harbors (Class III) in Long Island Sound do not occur in New York but rather the honor goes to several Connecticut harbors -none of which are likely to be allowed to use the new site.

The Long Island Sound Taskforce favors the designation of WLIS III: Not because the taskforce believes the action is without impact but rather with the realization that when the pros and cons are weighed, the need for the new site clearly outweighs possible impacts. The body of existing research does not support the claims of adverse impacts from Long Island and others when considering the disposal of relatively clean material such as proposed for WLIS III.

In addition, for the first time in the history of dredging in Long Island Sound, there is a commitment between the parties involved -- Federal, state and private -- to effect a dredging strategy based on sound environmental logic and demonstrated need.

The dredging issue is far from over. The need to dredge the contaminated sediment from Black Rock harbor in Bridgeport along with the proposed elimination of 100 percent federal funding for federal navigation projects will severely test this newfound cooperation between dredging interests. But dredging is an issue which should be decided on the best available data and expertise, not on the provincial, selfish and emotional interest of those who fail to recognize the dynamic nature of Connecticut's and Westchester's harbors and the Sound itself.

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