

Mispillion inlet a nexus of concern

By Greg Layton, Milford Chronicle

MILFORD - Jobs, birds, crabs, homeland defense and the quality of life in a quaint bayside town.

Many things depend upon the jetty at the mouth of the Mispillion River, but the jetty is crumbling and help does not appear to be coming soon.

"This could put us out of business," said H. Hickman Rowland, who owns the Delaware Bay Launch Service on Cedar Creek. "That's not imminent, but four or five years from now, if things don't change, sure, we might have to relocate."

He said the crumbling jetty has caused water to slow at the mouth of the Mispillion River and sand to pile in the way of his business's boats.

A group - including environmentalists, businessmen and town, state and federal leaders - took a ride with Mr. Rowland on July 2. They aimed to examine a structure whose preservation and repair could benefit their diverse interests.

Mr. Rowland's business uses four boats to carry supplies and crew to oil tankers in the Big Stone Anchorage and wouldn't exist if it couldn't send vessels in and out of the Mispillion River inlet.

Although launch service boats can run in water as shallow as 3 1/2 feet, they often strike a sandbar in the shallow water just beyond the jetty, Mr. Rowland said.

And when the tide is low and a northwest wind is blowing, as it does throughout most winters, the boats must wait as long as two hours to pass the sandbar, he said.

Considering that the launch service sends boats on about 20 trips a day, seven days a week, year round, those delays could add up to days' worth of idling.



Ecological Research & Development Group President Glenn Gauvry, left, and Coastal Programs Manager Dave Carter, right, talk with U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle, on July 5. The congressman was in Slaughter Beach to hear concerns about the jetty at the mouth of the Mispillion River. Milford Chronicle/Greg Layton

"Our customers are not real pleased about that," he added.

Because the launch service's customers include oil companies and the U.S. Coast Guard, its work could have far-reaching consequences.

When oil tankers must wait for pilots to guide them up the Delaware Bay to one of seven refineries near Philadelphia, gasoline customers could pay a portion of the price.

When the U.S. Coast Guard must wait to inspect vessels from other countries, national security could be at risk.

DBLS could move to another spot on the Delaware Bay, but it would be farther from the deep water where tankers prefer to anchor and transfer oil into barges. "Lightering," as the process is called, allows tankers to navigate the shallow waters of the northern bay.

Aside from a river in Texas, the Delaware Bay sees more tanker traffic than any other waterway in the United States, he said.

Sending launch service boats from Lewes or Philadelphia to the deep water that lies alongside Slaughter and Big Stone beaches would make life more difficult for many people, Mr. Rowland said.

The trips would be longer, and launch boats from Lewes would have to travel into dangerous headwinds in the winter, he said.

"Could we do anything else?" he asked. "Sure, but it would make it more difficult, more expensive. This is the optimum place. This is the best place for it."

Help unlikely?

U.S. Rep. Michael N. Castle, R-Del., was among the group that toured the Mispillion jetty on July 5.

Laurie Carter, a part-time Slaughter Beach resident, organized the trip and said she had asked Delaware's congressional delegation to attend because repairing the jetty would probably be a federal project.

While stopping short of pledging support, Rep. Castle said the project would need state and federal support and that Slaughter Beach residents should explain exactly why they want the jetty repaired.

He said Slaughter Beach residents should also be prepared to explain what they could accept if the federal government couldn't fund all of the \$30 million project some people imagine. "But it can be done," he said.

Edward C. Voigt, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman, said the corps often uses the value of shipping on a waterway to justify a project, and because most of the boats on the Mispillion River and Cedar Creek are fishing boats, the Mispillion Inlet probably wouldn't qualify for funding if the sole criterion were economic.

Mr. Rowland said the value of the shipping DBLS serves should be taken into consideration.

Mr. Voigt said the corps also funds projects according to their importance to the environment, and the Mispillion jetty appears to have environmental value, but projects nationwide are competing for federal funding.

Still, he said, Delaware's congressional delegation could try to put money in the federal budget for a project at Slaughter Beach.

"But we'd have to conduct environmental studies, draw up designs, make all kinds of preparations," he said. "Even if everything went perfectly, we probably couldn't do anything for four or five years."

Mr. Rowland said Monday that the mouth of the Mispillion could be impossible to navigate within five years.

Other interests

Among the group seeing the jetty on July 2 were members of Slaughter Beach Town Council, state Rep. V. George Carey, R-Milford, state Sen. F. Gary Simpson, R-Milford, Ecological Research & Development Group President Glenn Gauvry and various officials from the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control.

They held a range of interests in the Mispillion jetty.

Members of Slaughter Beach Town Council want to see the jetty repaired because they believe it will slow erosion along the town's beaches, said Mayor Frank Draper.

They also believe that the jetty should be modified, because its present shape causes rotting vegetation to wash ashore on the north end of Slaughter Beach, he said.

Dave Carter, who studies shorebird and horseshoe crabs for DNREC, said he wants to see the jetty repaired because it will help preserve shorebird habitat.

For example, it keeps the bay from washing away islands where shorebirds may roost safe from predators, he said.

He hopes the corps will agree to use spoils from future dredging near the Mispillion to build those islands, which are especially important because most of the world's red knots stop near Slaughter Beach during their May migrations.

"There are perhaps 30,000 to 50,000 redknots, hemispherically, and we have seen as many as 40,000 in the Mispillion harbor at one time," he said.

"The word we get is that the red knot could be extinct in 15-20 years if something is not done - so we need to move faster to have them listed as an endangered species," said Rep. Castle.

Mr. Carter said the species' population appears to have stabilized, but no environmental scientist would disagree that preserving habitat near the mouth of the Mispillion is vital to its survival.

Mr. Gauvry said the mouth of the Mispillion also is the most productive horseshoe crab spawning ground on the planet.

So, although their interests differ, repairing the jetty at the mouth of the Mispillion River is something lots of folks can agree upon.

"I'm kind of excited about this," said Mr. Rowland. "I mean, I love shorebirds. I grew up in Lewes, so I love the outdoors, but it's kind of rare that my interests overlap with the bird watchers. This is something that could help all of us."