

News

Army Corps issues study on river-dredging effects

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

By JOHN M. ROMAN

jroman@delcotimes.com

An updated environmental assessment by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers found that the proposed dredging of the Delaware River shipping channel “would have no significant, adverse effects on the human environment” over and above the potential environmental effects already addressed in the earlier environmental impact statements.

“It’s possible we could award the first dredging contract before the end of September, with work to begin shortly after,” said USACE spokesman Ed Voigt on Tuesday. That would be the earliest the contract would be awarded, he said.

The proposed dredging of the 103-mile channel from 40 to 45 feet — including 9 miles in Delaware County — to accommodate larger vessels and compete with deeper East Coast ports has been the focus of an ongoing feud over 15 years between Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Gov. Rendell and local congressmen have strongly supported the dredging project, but New Jersey officials have opposed it, citing its low payback, environmental concerns, ranging from the impact on river habitat and wildlife, to drinking water issues.

Although the \$300 million-plus project was initially approved by Congress in the Water Resources Act of 1991, it’s been dead in the water ever since despite previous studies by the Army Corps of Engineers and the General Accounting Office.

About a third of the project will be funded by the Delaware River Port Authority, the nonfederal sponsor. New Jersey officials have argued that the project’s overall costs will be closer to \$500 million.

“No significant adverse environmental effects are expected to occur as a result of the issues addressed in this environmental assessment,” concluded the latest study issued this month.

“The Corps is committed to work closely with federal and state resource agencies, prior to and during project construction, to continue monitoring and collection of additional environmental data, provide relevant supplemental information as needed, and to apply adaptive management and best management practices as appropriate,” the study stated.

“Consequently, it is concluded that no new supplemental EIS is required prior to construction of the subject project,” stated Lt. Col. Thomas J. Tickner, district commander of the Philadelphia District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, in a public notice.

The project calls for deepening the existing Delaware River Federal Navigation Channel from Philadelphia Harbor and Beckett Street Terminal in Camden, N.J., to the mouth of the Delaware Bay.

It will also provide appropriate bend-widening, partial deepening of the Marcus Hook Anchorage, and relocation and addition of aids to navigation.

The Final EIS was released in 1992, followed by a Supplemental EIS in 1997 and a record of decision was made in 1998 for the project.

U.S. Rep. Robert Brady, D-1, of Philadelphia, who represents portions of the county, has been 100 percent supportive of the dredging project. He could not be reached for comment Tuesday.

The Delaware Riverkeeper Network, a nonprofit, environmental organization, has said the dredging will threaten drinking water supplies, introduce dangerous toxins into the river, threaten species such as the shortnosed sturgeon, blue crabs and horseshoe crabs and harm adjacent wildlife habitat and wetlands.
