



THE PORT of Port Lavaca - Point Comfort

CALHOUN PORT AUTHORITY

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Providing the Texas Mid-Coast Region With Direct Deep-Draft Access to Global Markets

For The Wave
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Channel Improvement Permitting Process Involves A Wide Scope of Studies and Many Participants

Second In A Series

When the Calhoun Port Authority filed a permit application for the Matagorda Ship Channel Improvement Project it started an environmental review process that will consist of comprehensive studies and involve scores of scientists, engineers, planners and community representatives.

Over the coming year the process will follow a well-established set of steps required by federal law. Project planning will continue along with data collection, field studies, impact assessments, coordination with state and federal agencies, and ongoing opportunities for the public to offer helpful information, suggestions and comments.

The Port Authority is seeking a permit that would allow the ship channel to be deepened from 36 feet to 42-44 feet and widened to perhaps 400 feet.

Preparation for the environmental review started last year when the Port began assembling a consulting team to do preliminary engineering and field studies needed to get the permit application prepared. The team is led by the Houston office of URS Corp., a national engineering firm with wide experience in waterway project design and permitting.

Herb Maurer, who retired last year from the Army Corps of Engineers (COE), is working as a special adviser to the Port Authority Board on the permitting process. He spent 40 years handling Texas water improvement projects and was Deputy Director of the COE's Galveston District at the time of his retirement.

The extensive studies associated with this project started with assembling available information and collecting field data on currents, water levels, salinity, waves, water quality, subsurface conditions, sediments, habitats, wetlands, erosion, oysters, archeological resources, pipeline locations and other measures of current conditions in the vicinity of the

Port Authority Board Members: Paul R. Blasingim, *Board Chairman*; Roger G. Martinez, *Board Secretary*; H. C. Wehmeyer, Jr.; Leo J. Kainer; J. C. Melcher Jr.; Shields A. Holladay, Sr.

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Matagorda Ship Channel. This included mapping the region's physical features, geology, climate and habitats.

Mark Mazoch, the URS project manager for the ship channel improvement project, said it is of significant benefit that the Lavaca-Matagorda Bay system is already one of the most extensively studied bay systems in the country. A great deal of invaluable data has been collected over the past 20 years providing a good understanding of environmental conditions, he said.

Mazoch said planners are doing extensive work on several areas of special concern to the Calhoun County community including shoreline erosion, possible handling of contaminated sediments, and potential impacts on Pass Cavallo.

While previous comprehensive studies have shown that shoreline erosion is mostly the result of normal wind-generated waves and hurricanes, the Project Team is working on a shoreline erosion study to evaluate the impact of wakes generated by vessels of different sizes moving at various speeds. This will help in designing any recommended shoreline protection measures such as breakwater structures.

Port Director Robert H. Van Borssum said the material generated by the ship channel improvement project will provide a unique opportunity to improve and protect area shorelines on a scale that would otherwise be impossible.

The Corps of Engineers' Research & Development Center in Vicksburg, Mississippi, has agreed to expand work already done on Pass Cavallo. They will develop and run models to evaluate any new impacts the proposed deeper and wider ship channel may have on Pass Cavallo.

The Point Comfort Turning Basin and about 1.5 miles of the Matagorda Ship Channel pass through the restricted use areas associated with the Alcoa/Lavaca Bay Superfund Site. Sediments in this area have been primarily impacted by mercury. This area has been studied extensively and was the subject of a 2001 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) decision. One of the suggested remedies for mercury in the sediments includes placing clean material over areas of concern to accelerate the natural recovery process.

Channel project studies will explore the possibility of using virgin dredge material from the channel deepening project to cover contaminated sediments – potentially a highly beneficial use of this material. Since 1989 the Corps of Engineers and the Calhoun Port

Authority have performed seven successful maintenance dredging operations in the restricted area with no elevated mercury contaminant levels showing up in sediment and water quality samples.

Consultants are now at work on hydrodynamic and salinity modeling which will allow them to do long-term simulations of conditions in the bay system with and without the proposed channel improvements. They will also model the conditions to reflect simulated drought conditions when there is less freshwater inflow into the bays.

Work has begun on a project to simulate actual ship movements on the channel after the proposed widening and deepening. The first step was to photograph the Matagorda Ship Channel and surrounding landmarks. Once the simulation model is ready, one or more of the Matagorda Pilots will “drive” the simulator in real time under various weather and current conditions with an appropriately sized vessel. Mazoch explained that the purpose of this simulation is to optimize the channel dimensions to maximize navigational safety. The harbor pilots will be evaluating proposed channel dimensions and identifying any required adjustments to channel design.

The Project Team has also been developing dredge material quantity estimates, preliminary dredge material placement plans and various beneficial use ideas. All of these will be evaluated further during the environmental impact assessment phase. The Port will be encouraging the public to suggest possible beneficial uses.

The NEPA Process

The National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires that if a proposed Corps of Engineers action may have significant impacts, then the COE is required to do a full environmental impact statement (EIS). An EIS will be required for this ship channel improvement project. The project planning effort and the EIS process must consider various alternatives to meeting the region’s need to safely and efficiently serve deepdraft shipping. This includes the option of making no improvements at all.

PBS&J, a consulting firm that has prepared the EIS for many waterway improvement projects on the Texas Coast, will be the independent third-party EIS contractor for the Matagorda Ship Channel project, working under the Corps’ direction and control. Third-

party contracting is a voluntary arrangement in which the permit applicant pays for a contractor to assist the Corps in complying with the NEPA requirements.

PBS&J has 30 years of experience in this specialized field and has done more environmental studies for the Corps of Engineers Galveston District than any other firm. PBS&J has done EIS work on such projects as the Houston Ship Channel, Corpus Christi Ship Channel, the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, the Texas City container terminal and Packery Channel.

The firm has previously conducted numerous studies on Matagorda and Lavaca Bays including water, sediment and analyses of maintenance dredge material; work relating to realignment of the Intracoastal Waterway; and 12 years of work relating to discharges into Upper Lavaca Bay.

Public Involvement Opportunities

The public will get an opportunity to participate in this environmental assessment process soon. As required by NEPA regulations, the Corps of Engineers and PBS&J will conduct a local public Scoping Meeting to allow interested parties to make suggestions on the scope of issues that should be explored in the upcoming EIS.

Introductory meetings with state and federal natural resource agency representatives have been held to get their comments on what specific issues should be addressed.

As a result, a number of topics have already been identified to be addressed in the EIS. These include such areas as salinity intrusion, dredged material management/beneficial use plan, endangered species, marine and estuarine resources, creation of new habitat, historic resources, water quality impacts, social and economic impacts, and cumulative impacts.

The process of developing a draft environmental impact statement will take several months. Once the draft EIS is published the public will be invited to review it and provide their comments. The Corps of Engineers and PBS&J will then take several more months to respond to the public and agency comments, make additions and publish the final EIS. Only then can the COE make a decision on granting the Port Authority a permit for improvements to the Matagorda Ship Channel.

Van Borssum encourages the public to offer their questions, ideas and comments on the project and the environmental impact assessment process. Notice of the upcoming public scoping meeting will be published in the Port Lavaca Wave.

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The Wave will be presenting a series of stories on the proposed Matagorda Ship Channel Improvement Project permitting effort. Next in the series: Developing a plan for using dredge material to benefit the environment and the community.