

5 feet makes a difference

Economic benefits of dredging Delaware River are obvious

THOMAS J. TICKNER

Leading a Corps of Engineers district is an honor for any Army engineer officer. But for me, the honor is double, because commanding the Philadelphia District has also meant coming back home to the Delaware Valley, where I was born and raised.

I mention this because the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, particularly in connection with deepening the Delaware River's shipping channel, is sometimes portrayed as a bunch of faceless bureaucrats who couldn't care less about the area or its environment. I assure you that's not true of me, living here now with my wife and children and hopefully for good someday. Nor is it true of the engineers, scientists and other district employees who have been working here (and living here with their families) for years or even decades. This watershed matters to us all!

We are about far more than just "building things." This past Sunday, I accepted a federal award for work we've been doing, with the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control as one of our partners, to restore the Delaware Bay oyster population. Since the 1980s, we've been busy in South Jersey cleaning up Superfund sites for EPA. Earlier this year, we finished upgrading a fish passage around Philadelphia's historic Fairmount Dam. Just weeks ago, we teamed with DNREC using sand dredged from the Mispillion Inlet under a corps maintenance contract to repair an adjacent breakwater that shelters a critical horseshoe crab/migratory shorebird habitat.

As to deepening the Delaware channel, it's important to remember we've been dredging this vital waterway from Philadelphia and Camden through the Delaware Bay for more than a century. We've been maintaining its current 40-foot depth since World War II. No one has seriously challenged whether this should continue. The question is whether we dredge to 40 or 45 feet.

Will 5 feet make that much difference?

Economically, we believe it will, by allowing more efficient navigation. Opponents contend it will return only 50 cents on the dollar, citing the Government Accountability Office as their source. But the GAO never set forth such a claim. Their 2002 review was not a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis, but an audit of the corps' 1997 analysis. They recommended we bring in third-party experts for a complete reanalysis, and we then complied, as the GAO has formally acknowledged. The independent consultants' 2004 final report estimated the project will return \$1.15 in benefits for every dollar in cost. Bear in mind this figure is very conservative, since as a federal agency we cannot consider local benefits or increased port business.

Environmentally, we believe it will do no harm. The corps' findings are backed up not only by the multitude of biological and chemical tests we have conducted, but also by the endorsements of EPA and other agencies that reviewed our results. Nor should these results be surprising, because decades of maintenance dredging have worked like an underwater vacuum to clear the channel of debris and contaminants, leaving not "muck" but varying combinations of silt, clay, sand and

gravel. Moreover, some of the sand removed from the Delaware Bay portion of the channel will be re-used to help reclaim eroded wetlands along Delaware's shoreline.

What to do with the sediment has also become an issue, but it shouldn't be any longer. In the nearly 10 years since we applied for the Delaware permit, while the project itself has not changed, the amount of work required to construct it has been cut in half. Thanks mostly to advances in survey technology, plus a combination of natural forces, we now realize there's much less dredging involved getting to 45 feet. That also means no new disposal areas, since we can place all the Delaware River material in the same federally owned sites we've used since World War II.

As a public agency, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers welcomes public debate. Our job is not to advocate for projects, nor to decide whether they continue. But as long as the project is entrusted to us, our job is to explain how we carry it out, based on the best science and engineering available.

We believe the more people understand the work we do, the more everyone benefits.