

Army Corps delays channel-deepening decision

BY SHELLY STROM

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The pace for a \$200 million proposal to deepen the Columbia River shipping channel from Astoria to Interstate 5 is happening slower than originally expected.

The Army Corps of Engineers, leading the proposal, was on a path toward a construction start date in 2001. Ports along the lower Columbia River, except for the Port of Astoria, have given the project their stamp of approval. A deeper channel is needed, port officials say, in order for the region to handle fully loaded ships and remain competitive.

But the proposal, on a year-long course of getting OKs from land-use agencies in both Oregon and Washington, has hit a few bumps. The decision was expected to be issued in April, but will be delayed until at least this summer, said Laura Hicks, a spokeswoman for the Corps of Engineers.

In attempts to block the project, environmentalists have filed lawsuits alleging the project, scheduled for round-the-clock, months-long construction, would harm endangered salmon and destroy too much wetlands habitat. Those legal maneuvers may also be slowing the pace of the project.

And regulators in Oregon and Washington haven't been as swift to weigh-in on whether the project would meet clean-water laws as corps officials once expected. The Washington state agency that oversees shoreline development still must give its nod.



US Army Corps
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In Oregon, the Department of Environmental Quality has yet to give its opinion on whether the project will comply with guidelines to prevent water-pollution guidelines. Officials say they don't have a definite time for when that might be issued, work that likely has been slowed by a looming decision to list the Willamette River as a top candidate for federal cleanup.

Washington regulators say they aren't working toward any hard-and-fast deadline to give their decision on whether the project passes muster with their clean water and shoreline development rules. "We're still in a fact-finding phase," said Sandy Howard, Washington Department of Ecology spokeswoman. "Terns, crab, smelt and sturgeon all could be impacted by deep-water dredging. We're trying to coordinate with the Fish and Wildlife Service to consider what impacts there might be to species," Howard said. The agency hasn't worked out a plan for managing dredged material, either, she said.

"We're trying to look at all the pieces and be accommodating. But we don't want to compromise any of the issues. The environment is our No. 1 consideration. We're trying to come to a good decision for the environment and the

economy."

That slower pace means the Corps has delayed issuing its final decision—known as a "Record of Decision"—until additional approvals fall into place. The document is intended to reflect comments by public agencies and the public at-large on the channel deepening proposal. It is needed to move the project from the planning phase to actual work.

One of most recent ingredients to fall into place was when the Washington State Legislature agreed to kick in \$10 million toward the project late last month.

But the money, approved as part of the state budget in an 11th-hour session, is less than half of the \$27.7 million outlined as Washington's share, and it is piling up slower than previously expected.

A ripple effect of the delays mean that money expected to be in-hand to complete Oregon's \$27.7 million share of the project will be put off until at least next year. The first of a \$10 million chunk of lottery proceeds the Oregon Legislature approved for the project in 1997 will begin streaming in on a quarterly basis to a channel deepening fund on July 1.

But the rest of the state's share likely won't materialize as soon as originally expected. Legislation passed in 1999 by Oregon Lawmakers provides money for the project via lottery-backed bonds that will be triggered when it

moves from the planning phase to construction.

"Our expectation is that it won't happen within this biennium [which ends June 30, 2001]," said Mike Burton, assistant director of Oregon Economic and Community Development. Burton's office is in charge of handling the state's share of channel deepening money.

"With the lawsuits that have been filed and other questions on environmental impact, it's just our guess" that the project won't get as far along this year as previously expected, Burton said. "But we're not ready to drop it as a priority." The \$17.7 million that would cover the remainder of Oregon's share of channel deepening is part of a \$112 million package of projects that would be paid for with only \$70 million raised via the bonds.

As things stand now, \$42 million of that package, which includes everything from channel deepening to infrastructure to a pipeline in Coos Bay, wouldn't get funded. The thinking is, Burton said, that not all of those projects would make it off the drawing board and be in need of funding during the same biennium.

In Washington, a state funding shortage slowed the state in confirming its financial burden. Last year, legislators approved an initial \$10 million and the remaining \$17.7 million was to follow.

But last fall, voters slashed the state budget by eliminating the state's vehicle excise tax. That temporarily erased \$10 million set aside for the project.

Instead of approving the \$17.7 million that would have completed the state's obligation, legislators were merely able to restore the first round of financing. □

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MIKE BURTON
 OREGON ECONOMIC &
 DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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