

Groups fear dredge spoils devastation

Crab grounds under threat from latest proposal

By **MIKE STARK**

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Plans to dump millions of cubic yards of Columbia River muck onto the Pacific Ocean floor may be the newest battle over dredging in the river.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the federal Environmental Protection Agency are looking at using a 14-square-mile patch of ocean floor near the mouth of the river as a dredge disposal site.

The idea is catching criticism from groups on both sides of the Columbia concerned about damage to the ocean floor environment and valuable Dungeness crab grounds.

Although it's difficult to say exactly how the dumpsite would affect the existing ecosystem, there would "certainly be biological consequences," said Kathy Taylor, executive director of the Columbia River Estuary Study Taskforce, which represents cities, counties and port districts on both sides of the river.

Every year, the corps digs up millions of cubic yards of sand to keep the Columbia River shipping channel clear and safe. Millions more could be dug up if plans go through to dig another 3 feet into the channel between Astoria and Portland.

The ocean spot, which could eventually take more than 200 million cubic yards of dredge spoils, is about 5 miles off the mouth of the river. The area is within the Columbia River plume, where fresh water mixes with salt and creates a unique ecosystem.

The site, expected to be used at least 50 years, will take sand from maintenance dredging along the channel and the proposed project to deepen the channel.

The corps is also looking at other shallow water spots to dump dredge spoils.

Later this summer, the EPA is scheduled to release a draft proposal on the ocean dump site, according to John Malek, team leader of the agency's regional sediment management program in Seattle.

The public and other agencies will have 45 days to comment on it before it goes to the next phase.

Malek expects biological studies will be conducted sometime next year to look at crabs and other resources that may be affected.

There's nothing in the works, though, to look at the economic effects of using the ocean disposal site.

"At this point, there are no studies planned. But that isn't to say there may not be at some point," Malek said.

The government needs to take a second look at its study of the project, said Dale Beasley, president of the Columbia River Crab Fishermen's Association.

The association, representing more than 100 Oregon and Washington crabbers, says the ocean disposal site could have a disastrous effect on local fishing communities where crabbing fuels the economy.

Among other things, the group wants an economic study on how ocean dumping will affect the local fleet and economy.

Beasley told the Port of Ilwaco commission last week that the government should look at placing the sand at Benson Beach, an area that has been eroding for years at Fort Canby State Park near Ilwaco.

Part of the concern for Beasley and others is that the river spoils may be contaminated.

"If harmful chemical compounds are found, then the material should be treated as hazardous and handled in a responsible manner," Taylor said. "Dioxins have been found throughout the Columbia River and are known to be harmful."

Malek is convinced that the spoils that would go to the ocean site are clean, he said.

"This part of the country is probably the leader in testing and managing sediments," Malek said. "The material that is there in the Columbia River, with a couple of very small exceptions very far upriver, is probably some of the cleanest you'll ever find."

If the material isn't polluted, Oregon and Washington should look at using clean sand to help stop shoreline erosion, Taylor said.

Peter Huhtala, executive director of the Columbia Deepening Opposition Group, said the corps and EPA need to look for somewhere else to dump the spoils.

"The Columbia plume is an area of incredible biological productivity," Huhtala said. "The corps would do better to bury 14 square miles of old-growth forest."

He's worried about what might be headed to the ocean in light of studies that show contaminants.

"The corps has cleared all Columbia River channel sediments as appropriate for ocean disposal - when they know they contain dioxin, pesticides, PCBs, toxic metals and more," he added. "What are we supposed to tell the tourists: 'Take your kids to the beach and bring home cancer?'"

Malek, though, says interest in Columbia River sand from places like San Francisco shows that the sand has been shown clean enough to use for fill.

Eventually, the government should take a closer look at trying to sell clean dredge spoils, he said. Right now, with joint ownership between Washington and Oregon, there are too many tangles to work out.

"It's probably where the federal government should end up going."