



NoPort News

A newsletter of the North Carolina International Terminal

All the news that prints to fit.

June 1, 2010

A Lesson from Georgia

The Savannah District of the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Georgia Ports Authority are struggling to conclude a feasibility study for dredging the Savannah River to the container terminal at Garden City, upriver from Savannah. The study has been underway in one form or another since 1997. The current estimate of the date to release the final report is mid-2011. The cost has been variously reported as \$36 million (*Dredging Today*) to \$40 million (*Atlanta Journal-Constitution*).

In 1997, the Georgia Ports Authority commenced the feasibility study at its own expense, as is permitted by the laws governing such projects.. When the report was issued in the very next year, it was regarded as somewhat inadequate. Congress authorized the project in 1999, but with the condition that the final plan be approved by the Secretary of the Interior (US Fish & Wildlife Service), the Secretary of Commerce (NOAA Marine Fisheries), and the Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. So a new study, called *Tier II*, was started.

We have not been able to learn the original estimate of the cost of the study. In 2004, the Savannah District of the Corps estimated the cost at \$24,250,000, of which more than \$19 million was Georgia's share. The most recent figure we have found is \$36 million.

The cost of the project itself has similarly escalated. The cost authorized by Congress in 1999 was \$230,174,000, which included extensive mitigation measures. Senator Johnny Isakson is now asking for \$675 million for fiscal year 2011 for the project.

The Savannah River project is remarkably similar to the project to dredge the Cape Fear River that the Wilmington District of the Corps is so determined to pursue. The depth would increase to 48 feet from 42 feet. There is an issue of beach erosion at Tybee Island due to the channel, just as we have at Bald Head Island and Caswell Beach. There is a problem of penetration of the aquifer, just as the Cape Fear River dredging would penetrate the Castle Hayne aquifer. The issues of salt water intrusion upriver and in tidal inlets are the same. Loss of salt marshes. Insufficient oxygen at lower depths. Damage to marine habitat.

But there are dissimilarities, too. The Georgia Ports Authority sponsors a "Stakeholders Evaluation Group," a mechanism for public participation. Our North Carolina State Ports Authority has not bothered with such a thing. And of course the Wilmington District of the Corps has steadfastly excluded the public.

So that's what we are in for if the State of North Carolina provides a letter of intent to the Corps of Engineers for a feasibility study. A dozen years of studying ways to mitigate problems from unnecessary dredging, and tens of millions of dollars wasted. All in aid of a \$3 billion vanity project.

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