

This is the third in a series of newsletters to keep you informed of the progress of a feasibility study for deepening and widening the Mobile Harbor Federal Navigation Channel.

Mobile District

www.sam.usace.army.mil/

Winter 2017-2018 Issue 03

Newsletter

A Word from the Commander



Col. James Delapp

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), Mobile District is making progress in the evaluation of the environmental, engineering and economic impacts from potential Mobile Harbor modifications, which will be published in a General Reevaluation Report (GRR). The study, which is cost-shared with the project's local sponsor, the Alabama State Port Authority, is estimated to be a four-year, \$7.8 million effort.

The team has spent a great deal of time and

Preliminary Study Results Announced at February 22nd Public

The GRR Project Team conducted water quality and sediment transport modeling to characterize the existing conditions of the study area and determine the relative changes in those conditions due to widening and deepening the navigation channel. The results of the modeling efforts were then used to evaluate the effects a modified channel on sensitive habitats within the study area such as wetlands, submerged aquatic vegetation, oysters, benthic invertebrates, and fish. As presented at the Town Hall meeting on February 22nd, preliminary results indicate habitat impacts appear to be minimal. No major impacts, or loss of resources, are anticipated as a result of the proposed project to the 77,000 acres of wetlands, 6,000 acres of submerged aquatic vegetation, and the 13 adult oyster reefs that were evaluated. Modeling runs were also conducted to evaluate the effects of the proposed project under a sea level rise scenario of 0.5 meters, and the results were very similar to the no sea level rise case (i.e., the project is expected to have a minimal effect with or without sea level rise).

In addition to the habitat impact results, the team presented finalized disposal locations for sediment dredged as a result of harbor expansion at the public meeting. New work



Placement of dredged material into portions of the Relic Shell Mined Areas would potentially help to increase the ecological productivity of the bay bottom areas and keep the sediment within the bay system.

Preliminary Study Results Announced at February 22nd Public Meeting

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material for the proposed channel modifications would be placed in three locations. These are the Relic Shell Mined Area (see article on page 3), Sand Island Beneficial Use Area (if material meets criteria for placement), and the Ocean Dredged Material Disposal Site.

After evaluating an array of alternatives, the GRR Project Team will finalize a Tentatively Selected Plan (TSP) from those alternatives. The TSP is the result of a six-step planning process, and a significant milestone for the GRR effort. The

current measures presented at the public meeting include: deepening the existing channel an additional 3 to 5 feet (existing 45 feet channel in the bay to 48-50 feet and exiting 47 feet channel in the bar to 50-53 feet); adding an additional 100 feet of widening for a distance of three miles beginning at the upper end of the bend area at the 49 foot depth; including bend easing with the deepening at the lower end of the bay channel; and, modification to the Choctaw Pass turning basin to ensure safe operation at the 49 foot depth.

Study results are used to determine the costs, benefits and environmental impacts of improving Mobile Harbor. The results of the all studies will be documented in the General Reevaluation Report and the Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. The decision on what – if any improvements are made to the channel – will be determined by the outcome of the GRR.

Project background

INTEGRATED GENERAL REEVALUATION REPORT WITH SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT



Photo by Alabama State Port Authority
Now a permanent part of Mobile's skyline, these new Super Post-Panamax Ship-to-Shore cranes support the growing size of container vessels arriving at Mobile Harbor.

Congress passed the River and Harbor Act of 1826 to improve transportation and commerce on the nation's waterways. Since that time, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been responsible for dredging the Federal Navigation Channel in Mobile, Ala. Over the years, this has included both maintenance and new work dredging. Since that time, there have been various modifications, to where currently, the majority of the channel is 45 feet deep and 400 feet wide. The 1986 Water Resources Development Act authorized the majority of the

channel to be 55 feet deep and 550 feet wide. That authorization was based on a report that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), developed in 1981.

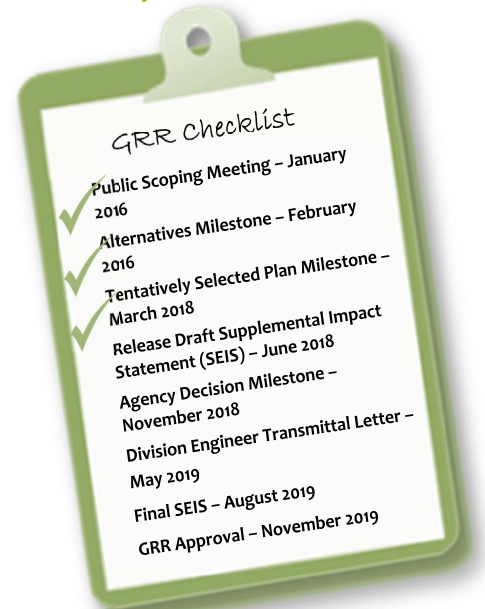
In June 2014, the Alabama State Port Authority (ASPA) submitted a request to the Mobile District to consider increasing the depth and width of the Mobile Harbor Federal Navigation Channel to dimensions authorized under Section 201 of the 1986 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). Under the 1986 WRDA, the authorized dimensions for the majority of the harbor were set at 55 ft. deep and 550 ft. wide. Currently, the majority of the channel is 45 ft. deep and 400 ft. wide.

In response to that request, the Mobile District began a general reevaluation study to determine the most economical and environmentally feasible dimensions for the channel. The study began in late 2015 and is a four-year, \$7.8 million effort that is cost-shared with the ASPA. The results of the study will be documented in an

Integrated General Reevaluation Report, along with a Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement. The integrated report will then be submitted to our higher authority for a final decision on whether to approve or deny any modifications.

“Modernizing the Port of Mobile is necessary because two-thirds of the Port of Mobile’s vessel traffic today is restricted or delayed directly impacting shipper costs and competitiveness.”

- James K. Lyons, ASPA Director



A Word from the Commander

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effort studying the environmental impacts that any changes would have on the Bay and Delta. The study includes possible impacts on many environmental aspects, including changes in salinity and how those changes may impact the benthic zone.

Two public meetings were held in the fall and winter. In September, the Mobile District hosted an open house in Bayou La Batre. More than 80 people took time out of their evening to stop by, speak with me and the team, and share their comments. On February 22nd, we held another well-attended public town hall meeting at the Mobile Convention Center with more than 100 stakeholders. An overview of the project and preliminary results from many study analyses were presented. Following the presentation, many questions were answered, information clarified and concerns expressed. It was

a productive engagement thanks to all of our attendees who took time out of their busy schedules to join and share information with us.

In addition to the analyses and public meetings, the team continues to meet with smaller stakeholder groups to discuss and document their concerns and to share information about the project. In the past few months, key team members met with community leaders in Africatown, a community adjacent to the Port, representatives from the Coastal Conservation Association, the Alabama Wildlife Federation and the Mobile County Wildlife Conservation Association, local non-governmental environmental organizations, and commercial fishing stakeholders on the eastern shore of Mobile Bay.

As always, we are eager to share the progress of the ongoing study with the public.

You can visit the Mobile District website to get current information on the Mobile Harbor study along with the slides presented at the latest public meeting.

As the study progresses, we will hold additional public engagements. The team chooses a different venue for each meeting in order to give everyone interested in the project an opportunity to attend, learn more about the process, ask questions, and provide feedback.

If you're interested in the Mobile Harbor GRR, I encourage you to visit the GRR section on the [Mobile District webpage](#) where you can subscribe to our list serve. You can also keep current on the GRR and other projects by following the Mobile District USACE on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).

Sincerely, COL. James DeLapp

Improving oyster shell mining areas, a potential benefit of proposed expansion

Improvement of the bay bottom impacted by historic oyster shell mining operations is a likely beneficial outcome of the proposed expansion of the Mobile Harbor navigation channel. As part of the ongoing study, the GRR Project Team is evaluating opportunities for the "beneficial use" of dredged material (sediment) that would be a by-product of the new work associated with the project. The re-use of dredged sediment is referred to as a beneficial use because its placement in areas affected by shell mining operations conducted decades ago is expected to improve the environmental productivity of impacted bay bottom habitat.

Fossilized oyster shell mining operations were allowed by permit in 1946 in certain parts of the bay.

Mined shells were used for concrete, roads, chemicals, and poultry feed. During the time period of 1947 through 1968 a total of 40 million cubic yards of shells were removed from the bay. Permitted dredging of shell deposits continued until 1982, at which time operations halted due to environmental concerns. The mining process resulted in an overall deepening of the bay bottom in mined areas, and is believed to be the cause of hypoxia, a condition of diminished oxygen availability during certain times of the year. Diminished oxygen availability affects the ecological productivity of the mined oyster reef areas and bay bottom in general.

These mined areas may be restored by placement of the new work dredged material associated

with the proposed widening and deepening activities. Placement of dredged material into portions of these areas would not only potentially help to increase the ecological productivity of the bay bottom, but in general, would also keep the sediment within the natural system.

Potential areas for restoration within the shell mined area were chosen at disturbed depths of 15 feet or greater based on information gathered from surveys from the early 1960s and the mid-1980s, acoustic surveying, physical sampling and probing. The proposed open bay dredged material placement is the result of beneficial use discussions with state and Federal agencies who serve on the Mobile Harbor GRR Cooperating Agency Team.

Protecting essential fish habitats, a priority of Mobile Harbor study

The waters of, and around, the Gulf of Mexico are home to federally-listed threatened and endangered species. It is also considered essential fish habitat – providing conditions necessary for spawning, breeding, feeding or maturing - for a number of species including shrimp, red drum, reef fish, as well as coastal migratory species that originate in the open sea.

The Mobile District works closely with organizations, and State and Federal agencies that have special expertise or jurisdiction in the study



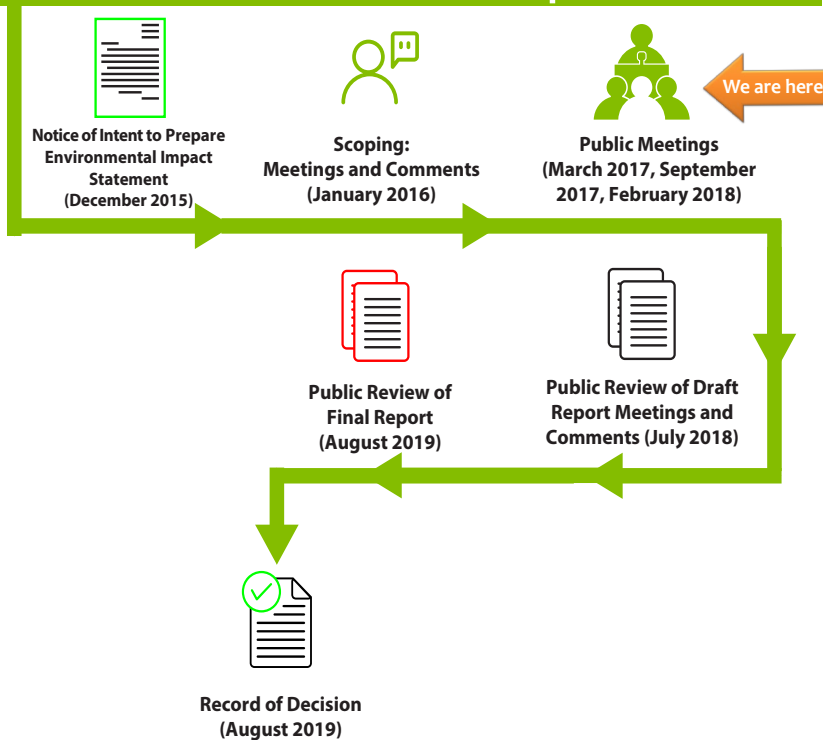
area. These partnerships provide valuable information and input. For example, agencies may assist in the verification of historic and existing data, project future conditions and participate in developing and analyzing impacts to resources.

Future studies to be conducted include a Biological Assessment, which will be performed by the Mobile District's Coastal Environment Team in coordination with the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS). The assessment will evaluate potential impacts to federally-listed threatened and endangered species and provide the District's determination based on those impacts. This assessment will likely end in a requirement for the

preparation of a biological opinion by the USFWS and the NMFS concerning, at a minimum, the Gulf sturgeon, sea turtles, manatees, piping plover, and a number of other avian species. Methods to avoid or minimize impacts to these species and/or enhance their continued survival or critical habitat will be considered in the GRR.

The NMFS reviews potential impacts on Essential Fish Habitat in estuarine areas and protected marine resources. The Mobile District's coordination with NMFS ensures that the recommended plan selected by the GRR is in accordance with Federal fishery management plans, and does not result in unacceptable impacts to the habitats of managed species.

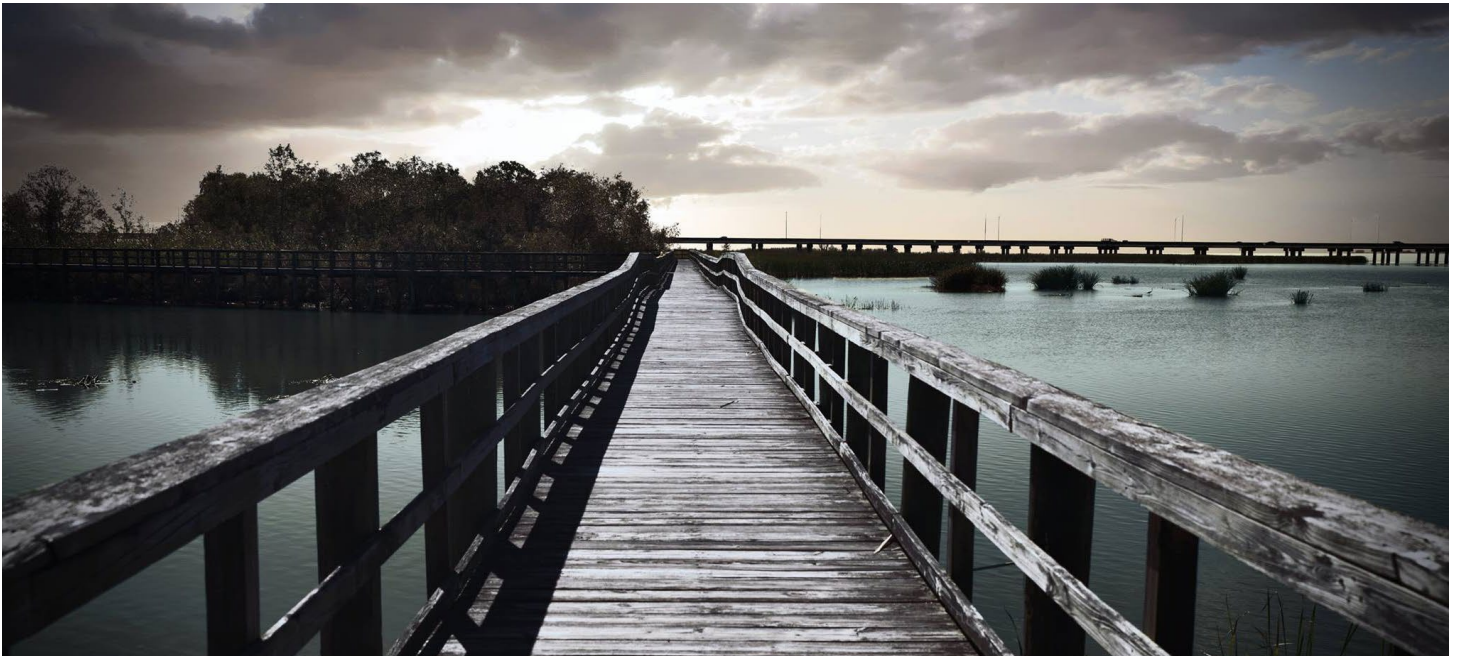
Status of the Report



Community Outreach



USACE, Mobile District Town Hall meeting at the Mobile Convention Center on February 22, 2018.



The sun hides behind some clouds along the boardwalk at Meaher State Park that overlooks Mobile Bay and Interstate 10 in Mobile, Alabama. (Photo by Tim Oberle, Deputy Public Affairs Officer)

How to get involved



Public comments on the study will be added to the official record for the project. All comments will be addressed at the appropriate time during the study. Both written and verbal comments may be received at public meetings by visiting the Public Comment area. Public comments can be made at any time during the preparation of the SEIS. Alternate methods to submit comments are:



Send an email to: MobileHarborGRR@usace.army.mil



Mail a letter to: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Attn: PD-F, P.O. Box 2288 Mobile AL 36628

Stay informed!



Biweekly updates and project documents on the project website.



Sign up for the listserve on the project website to receive a copy of the quarterly bulletin.

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