

Public to weigh dredge the Toledo shipping channel will be heard

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State environmental regulators are to convene in downtown Toledo on Jan. 14 to hear the public weigh in on the federal government's latest plan to dredge the Toledo shipping channel this summer.

The plan allows for the possibility of three times as much silt being dumped into western Lake Erie's fertile North Maumee Bay as is removed during usual dredging.

The hearing will be held inside Toledo City Council chambers in One Government Center immediately after the conclusion of a 6:30 p.m. public information session.

The Toledo Harbor federal navigational channel, which includes portions of the Maumee River and Maumee Bay, is the shallowest and, therefore, the most heavily dredged in the Great Lakes region. Records show no other port even comes close.

The silt comes primarily from farm runoff that gets into the Maumee between Fort Wayne, Ind., and Toledo.

Digging it out is vital for moving goods throughout America's heartland. Shipping is the region's most efficient way of moving goods. Ships cannot pass through the Toledo area if the channel is clogged.

Yet the traditional way in which U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has kept the Toledo navigational channel open has infuriated Great Lakes governors, biologists, and fishing advocates for more than 20 years because of how turbid the water gets when massive amounts of silt are dumped in it.

In recent years, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has annually dumped about 600,000 cubic yards of silt into North Maumee Bay, about two-thirds of the 800,000 to 900,000 cubic yards dredged annually.

The rest – containing sediment the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency considers too polluted for the lake – goes into a special waterfront landfill.

Now, in an apparent move to achieve more flexibility with water levels fluctuating, the Corps has asked the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency for permission to dredge up to 2 million cubic yards annually from 2010 through 2012.

About 1.9 million cubic yards of that could be dumped into the lake under the Corps proposal.

That means the Corps would be required to landfill only 5 percent of what it digs up.

For years, the Corps has spent roughly \$20 million a year to dredge 4 million cubic yards of sediment from all Great Lakes harbors and channels, the equivalent of 400,000 truckloads of soil.

Nearly a quarter of that came from the Toledo area.

The Corps' permit to dig and dispose is issued by the state EPA.

The Corps can seek relief from permits it considers too onerous, as it has in the past, from the Ohio Environmental Review Appeals Commission, the state body empowered to overturn Ohio EPA actions.

But questions exist over the degree to which the state EPA can address the cumulative effect of open-lake disposal.

Scientists such as Jeff Reutter of Ohio Sea Grant and Ohio State University's Stone Laboratory near Put-in-Bay long have argued that even clean sediment degrades water when it's dumped in such quantities.

Pollutants embedded in the lake bed are resuspended in the water. The lake's turbidity and its chemical composition affect fish reproduction and water quality, scientists have said.

The Ohio EPA said the latest Corps proposal “would result in a change from the current water quality conditions of the Maumee River and western basin of Lake Erie.”

The state EPA will accept written comments through Jan. 21.

The Corps typically dredges in June, after the Maumee River’s annual walleye run.

On Sept. 28, a new chapter may have emerged.

Tom Bridgeman, a researcher at the University of Toledo’s Lake Erie Center, told members of the Ohio Lake Erie Commission that free-flowing silt appears to be exacerbating the region’s problem with microcystis, a toxic form of algae that has diminished property values and western Lake Erie’s ecological balance.

Even with average seasonal rainfall last summer, western Lake Erie was blanketed by one of its largest swaths of microcystis, an indicator that something other than runoff is acting as an environmental trigger.

Mr. Bridgeman told the commission, a panel of state agency department heads, that researchers believe the lake’s turbidity helps the microcystis grow.

Mr. Reutter said after that meeting that people “would have seen a big mountain” of silt in North Maumee Bay by now if the dredged material did not swirl around the lake’s western basin.

The Corps has not responded to the latest finding other than to say that it considers its long-standing practice of open-lake disposal to be both cost-effective and safe for the environment.

It has said it is willing to work with Toledo, Oregon, and other local parties on the development of a second landfill facility to reduce the amount of silt going back into the lake.

However, the cost for such a facility is believed to be more than \$200 million, and municipalities can’t afford the 35 percent nonfederal matching share of about \$70 million.

Source:toledoblade,January 02, 2010;Image:Flickr,July 16,2006
