

## *Great Lakes Article:*

### **Officials seek funding for silt-to-mine proposal**

**By Tom Henry**

**Toledo Blade**

**Published February 22nd, 2005**

Despite anticipated budget cuts, Toledo-area officials still hope to get several million state and federal dollars to pay for showing how abandoned strip mines in southeastern Ohio could be filled with silt from western Lake Erie.

Such a use of dredged sediment is seen as a way of ending the 20-year stalemate between the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers over the corps' practice of dumping several hundred tons of silt dredged from the Toledo shipping channel back into the lake each summer.

The Ohio EPA, as well as several past and current Great Lakes governors, have for years decried open lake disposal as a destructive way of getting rid of the silt, even when the corps limits its dumping to sediment deemed clean enough by the U.S. EPA.

The fate of future harbor-to-mine silt transfers apparently lies in the outcome of a demonstration project proposed by a Columbus environmental consultant.

Ernie Neal, president of Neal Environmental Services LLC, said he hopes to show it is both environmentally responsible and economically feasible to dig out sediment that has been buried for years in a holding cell near Oregon called a confined disposal facility. The material removed from that dump would be shipped to southeastern Ohio for mine reclamation projects.

Mr. Neal told The Blade he has lined up a mine near Toronto, Ohio, owned by C&E Coal Inc., of Lisbon, Ohio, for the demonstration. The site is in northern Jefferson County, near the West Virginia state line.

But the pilot project, originally planned for this year, will likely be postponed until 2006 or later because of state and federal budget cutbacks, according to Mr. Neal and others involved with the project.

The demonstration would involve the removal and transfer of 350,000 cubic yards of sediment from the Oregon disposal facility.

If all goes well, about a million cubic yards could be removed each year for use there and at other mines. A million cubic yards is slightly more than what the corps is expected to dredge from the Toledo shipping channel this summer.

The Ohio EPA remains "very supportive of the concept, if it can be done in a very environmentally sound way," spokesman Dina Pierce said.

"At this point, everything's still in the discussion phase," she said.

Ms. Pierce said enough room could be opened up in the Oregon disposal facility to either reduce or end open lake disposal.

Steve Katich, staff director for U.S. Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D., Toledo), said the congressman hopes to pursue funding for the project under the government's Water Resource Development Act once plans are firm.

A cost estimate for the demonstration has not been submitted, he said.

Mr. Neal told The Blade he has narrowed his search for material to silt from the Toledo-Lucas County Port Authority's confined disposal facility near Oregon. At least two other facilities - in Cleveland and Lorain, Ohio - had been under consideration.

Brian Schwartz, port authority spokesman, said port officials hope to get money for the demonstration, but realize how tight money has become.

Confined disposal facilities are essentially waterfront landfills. They have been used since the federal Clean Water Act was passed in 1972 to bury sediment the corps dredges annually to keep Great Lakes shipping channels open.

Toledo is the most heavily dredged Great Lakes port. The corps typically spends \$6 million a year so ships can pass through the region and help keep the local economy afloat.

But since 1985, the corps has been using western Lake Erie to dump about two-thirds of the silt it digs up annually to help conserve space in the confined disposal facility. Most of the sediment that goes back into the lake is less polluted than what's dug from Toledo's inner harbor and goes into a shallow area 3 1/2 miles northwest of Toledo Harbor Light. The most polluted material still goes into the disposal facility.

A debate has raged for years over the impact on the lake ecology from the volume of material that gets dumped in the open water. State environmental regulators and governors have complained that the practice stirs up contaminants on the lake bottom, turns the water murky, and ruins habitat for fish and other aquatic creatures vital to western Lake Erie's fragile ecology. Scientists view the lake's western basin as the most vulnerable part of the Great Lakes, because it is the most shallow.

A new disposal facility would cost \$14 million and take eight years to build. At least \$5 million would have to come from state, local, or private sources.

The Ohio EPA would benchmark this state's demonstration against a similar pilot effort in central Pennsylvania called the Bark Camp Demonstration Project. Pennsylvania officials have said their project worked because the abandoned mine was filled with material that keeps rainwater out and is resistant to acid.

