

PRESS RELEASE

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www.sustainablecoast.org

Center for a Sustainable Coast hosts public forum on proposed deepening of Savannah Harbor & Channel

On May 26, nearly 100 individuals attended a public forum in Savannah organized by the Center for a Sustainable Coast. The purpose of the forum was to explore and discuss a range of issues surrounding the controversial \$600 million harbor deepening project.

Among these issues were some that had been included in the draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) issued last November by the Corps of Engineers – such as project impacts on fisheries and freshwater wetlands – and others that were not considered part of the scope of the EIS – such as job creation and the need for a multi-state or national port development strategy.

Following presentations by six speakers covering various aspects of these issues, there was a lively exchange of ideas and opinions in a free-ranging ‘questions-and-answers’ discussion.

Speakers (see box below) questioned the assumptions and analysis done by the Corps of Engineers, as documented in the EIS, noting that proposed remedies to control or compensate for adverse impacts – so-called mitigation actions – were unproven or widely believed to be ineffective. Doubt was also cast on the ability of the Corps to properly manage the project. Problems were described related to how information about impacts could not ensure quick, effective decisions if the project caused unexpected damage.

The proposal for deepening the harbor was initiated by Georgia Ports Authority in response to the trend of larger ships being used in transporting cargo to and from major ports throughout the world, especially in light of the enlargement of the Panama Canal, which will be completed in 2014.

Although the deepening has been under study for more than ten years under the guidance of a Stakeholder Evaluation Group, many feel that the analysis has been incomplete and fundamental questions still need to be answered.

Among the most consequential issues yet to be investigated is the matter of coordinating a strategy for port development throughout the Southeast. Public statements made by officials in charge of the Panama Canal expansion have made it clear that only a very few ports on the entire U.S. east coast will be called on by the “post-Panamax” mega-ships – probably no more than three ports, from the Gulf of Mexico through New England.

“We could not be more pleased with the community’s interest in this very important topic, as indicated by their participation in our forum” said David Kyler, the Center’s executive director. “We are convinced that the public needs to become more aware of the implications of deepening the harbor and the alternatives to it.”

Also discussed was the central question of whether additional port-related jobs would be created by the project. The Corps has claimed that all project benefits would result from more efficient shipping, even though the growth trend in commerce shipped through the Savannah port would remain unaltered. If additional jobs are created, as many project supporters claim, there are impacts from those jobs that still need to be evaluated, since the EIS has not considered that possibility.

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Featured Speakers and Key Comments *(in order of presentation)*

- **David Kyler (Center for a Sustainable Coast)**
Due to the risky impacts of the project and vulnerability of the environment, “adaptive management” must be used – and is now required under federal law. However, neither the EIS nor the Corps’ record substantiates confidence in the responsiveness needed for effective adaptive management. Procedures proposed by the Corps to manage the project are far too vague to protect public interest.
- **Bill Sapp (Southern Environmental Law Center)**
Despite having 13 years to do so, the Corps of Engineers still has not prepared a complete environmental impact statement that would comply with federal law.
- **Tonya Bonitatibus (Savannah Riverkeeper)**
Over 1.4 million people depend on the Savannah River to provide them with their drinking water and serve as a receptacle for their waste. It is the economic driver supplying the water needed to manufacture our goods, the water needed to carry our goods, and the water needed for recreation. The current plan for the harbor deepening does not adequately predict or resolve critical conflicts existing and projected. Failure to mitigate properly will not only harm the health of the river, but the economic resilience of the communities that rely upon it.
- **Jane Griess (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service)**
Savannah NWR has been impacted by repeated harbor deepening over the years and much of the tidal freshwater marsh has been converted to brackish marsh. This deepening will cause additional impact on these marshes. There is a great deal of uncertainty regarding how well impacts are predicted and how the mitigation features will perform. The FWS’s preferred alternative for deepening Savannah Harbor is the 45-foot alternative because 1) it minimizes the loss of already limited freshwater tidal wetlands; 2) it minimizes impacts to Savannah NWR; and 3) it will minimize risk and uncertainty of impacts on fish and wildlife resources.
- **Steve Willis (Sierra Club)**
The details, contradictions and complexities of the Corps study only hide the real issues: what will dramatic port growth do to the health, safety, and quality of life in Savannah? And, since America’s competitiveness in the 21st Century will be based on capacity to rapidly and economically move products between our markets and markets worldwide, America’s economic future is dependent upon state-of-the-art container shipping – the Corps’ analysis does not seriously consider factors or alternatives outside the Lower Savannah River in Georgia. This is tragic.
- **Andrea Malloy (South Carolina Coastal Conservation League)**
This Draft EIS proposes mitigation that just does not mitigate -- "replacement" of a really important and rare wetland type with a very common wetland, fish ladders for a fish that doesn't use fish ladders, iron lungs that are entirely experimental and zero money for replacement of a water pipe needed for Savannah drinking water.