



DREDGING

U.S. ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS

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Corps explains recent impacts of dredging on sea turtles

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Savannah District, is charged with dredging the Savannah and Brunswick harbors in order to keep essential commerce flowing safely in and out of the shipping channels.

The Corps constantly seeks ways to carry out the work efficiently, economically, and with as little impact to the environment as practical.

Dredging the harbors normally takes place December through March to avoid disturbing the sea turtle nesting season. A winter-only dredging restriction was implemented in 1992 by NOAA Fisheries and the Corps' South Atlantic Division.

However, it is difficult to accomplish all the work during this time and the dredging is expensive because of the limited number of companies who can support it.

To address the time and expense issues, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers planned a one-time pilot project for Brunswick Harbor and Savannah Harbor Navigation Channels, in which the Corps sought to minimize or reduce sea turtle entrapment rates.

The Corps of Engineers used tools and procedures to protect sea turtles that were not available when the winter dredging window restriction was established. Corps experts hoped that the demonstration project, using these tools and protocols, would impact the turtle population no more than in winter dredging seasons. Final results of the summer 2009 test are pending.

The Corps worked very closely and carefully with state and federal agencies to conduct the summer dredging pilot project under strict guidelines that all the agencies accepted. The agencies supporting the work included the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), NOAA Fisheries, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Georgia DNR personnel participated in a pre-project inspection of turtle monitoring and protection gear on both dredges and, in part, monitored the actual dredging activity.

The pilot project was well-planned, in advance, and had only been awaiting funding which the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) provided. While the ARRA funding put people to work, it was not the driving factor in the pilot test, only an ancillary benefit.

Sea turtle protection measures for both projects included: 1) conducting non-capture sweep trawling 48-hours before starting all dredging operations; 2) using dragheads equipped with sea turtle deflectors; 3) turning off dredge pumps when dragheads were raised off the sediment bottom; and 4) towing trawl nets along the sediment bottom at or near the dredging operations (non-capture sweep trawling) to prompt turtles to move. In addition, two sea turtle observers were on board each dredge to monitor for sea turtle takes collected on the inflow and overflow screening as well as inside the draghead.

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The Corps stopped the test early in both harbors when the number of turtles killed by the dredge approached the limit agreed-upon with state resource agencies.

This was a one-time pilot test, and the Corps has no plans to repeat it next summer. However, the Corps will continue to study turtle behavior in order to protect them during dredging.

In conjunction with ongoing regional and national efforts, the Corps will conduct additional biological studies in the spring and summer of 2010. Turtles will be tagged with satellite transmitters in order to track their locations relative to Corps navigation channels and dredging activities. The tagging proposal will also document the presence of age groups and their locations from autumn through summer.

Three Corps districts in the South Atlantic Division will provide funding for the 2010 study. Other support will come from: State of North Carolina and the Bald Head Island Conservancy, the State of Georgia and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the State of Florida with the Motte Marine Laboratories, and the State of South Carolina.

Updates to the tagging initiatives will be posted to the district's web site.

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