

FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Savannah Harbor Navigation Project Mitigation Recovery Chatham County, Georgia and Jasper County, South Carolina

NAME OF ACTION: Savannah Harbor Navigation Project, Mitigation Recovery

DESCRIPTION OF PROPOSED ACTION

The Savannah Harbor Navigation Project (Project) committed to produce migratory bird habitat in the Dredged Material Containment Areas (DMCAs) as mitigation for wetland impacts that resulted from impounding DMCA 14A in 2006. The mitigation plan is described in the August 1996 Environmental Impact Statement for the Savannah Harbor Long Term Management Strategy. The Project committed to provide 1,769 HUs of bird habitat each year. During 2013, 2014 and 2015, the Project failed to provide the required 1,769 Habitat Units (HU). This was partially due to lower funding than expected for O&M dredging, resulting in less water being pumped into the DMCAs. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), now expects that the Project would provide less than its commitment until 2019, when dike raising operations in the DMCAs will allow the Project to meet the mitigation requirements once again. Depending on the timing of construction, the Project's ability to provide wildlife habitat in the DMCAs may also be adversely affected by the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project. USACE, Savannah District evaluated ways through which additional wildlife habitats could be created within and adjacent to the DMCAs. USACE has revised its operational plans, resulting in more habitat being produced within the DMCAs each year. However, additional wildlife habitats would need to be created outside the DMCAs to cover the Project's present and anticipated near term deficit of 6,200 HUs.

To recover the temporary deficit in wildlife habitats, USACE proposes to rehabilitate multiple freshwater wetland impoundment pools at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge (SNWR) to improve the effectiveness of those sites as bird habitat. The proposed work consists of removing small cross dikes; clearing, deepening, and expanding interior ditches; raising dikes; and constructing water control structures. These actions would allow staff at the SNWR to produce more wildlife habitats within the Refuge impoundments.

ANTICIPATED ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

The proposed work would be performed at existing impoundments within the SNWR. No adverse impacts are expected to tidal wetlands or water quality outside the Refuge. The construction activities would result in minor short term impacts to air quality (from the construction equipment), the quality of ditched waters within the Refuge, and traffic. These

impacts would not extend beyond the construction period. Overall, the proposed work would benefit the environment by allowing the Refuge to produce more wildlife habitat than if the proposed action is not implemented.

MITIGATION

The proposed improvement of wildlife habitats in the wetland impoundments at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge would assist the Savannah Harbor Navigation Project in meeting its mitigation commitment of providing an average of 1,769 Habitat Units each year. USACE would continue to provide as many units of wildlife habitat as reasonably possible within the DMCAs of the Navigation Project. The proposed additional Habitat Units would be a short term solution to the Project's existing and expected near term deficit in mitigation habitat.

The proposed work would include appropriate measures to control erosion and storm water runoff during the construction to avoid impacts to nearby wetlands. No additional mitigation is warranted.

PUBLIC/AGENCY COMMENT

Copies of the EA and Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be distributed to all appropriate Federal and state natural resource agencies that may have an interest in the project. The documents will also be posted on the USACE Savannah District website. In addition, the District will issue a public notice of the availability of these documents to those who previously expressed interest in actions proposed on the Savannah River estuary. To date, the District has received no comments that were averse to the proposed action.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on a review of the information contained in the Environmental Assessment (EA), I have determined that the proposed recovery of wildlife mitigation for the Savannah Harbor Navigation Project through improvement of wildlife habitats in impoundments at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge is the best course of action. I have also determined that this proposed action is not a major Federal action within the meaning of Section 102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969. Accordingly, the preparation of an Environmental Impact Statement is not required. My determination was made considering the following factors discussed in the EA to which this document is attached:

- a. The proposed action would not have significant adverse effects on any threatened or endangered species.
- b. The proposed action would not cause any significant adverse impacts to wetlands.
- c. The proposed action would not have significant adverse impacts on cultural resources.
- d. The proposed action would not adversely impact traffic or air quality beyond the construction period.

- e. The proposed action would not result in unacceptable adverse cumulative or secondary impacts.
- f. The proposed action would not adversely impact public health or safety.
- g. The effects of the proposed action on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial.
- h. The proposed action complies with Executive Order 12898, "Federal Actions to Address Environmental Justice in Minority Populations and Low-Income Populations."

FINDINGS

The proposed action to produce wildlife mitigation for the Savannah Harbor Navigation Project through improvement of wildlife habitats in impoundments at the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge would result in no significant adverse environmental impacts and is the alternative that represents sound natural resource management practices and environmental standards.

-- DRAFT --

Date

Marvin L. Griffin
Colonel, U.S. Army
Commanding