



News

Restoration planned for James, Barren islands

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By **KONRAD SUROWIEC**
Staff Writer

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ANNAPOLIS Construction to restore James Island, at the mouth of the Little Choptank River, could start in seven years, with the site ready to take dredge material in 10 years.

Eastern Shore lawmakers were briefed Friday on the "Mid Chesapeake Bay Island Ecosystem Restoration" project by Frank Hamons, deputy director of harbor development for the Maryland Port Administration, and Kevin Brennan, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Also joining the discussion were members of the Dorchester Shoreline Erosion Group, including Joe Coyne, president, and Bruce Coulson.

The Mid-Bay island restoration project involves two Dorchester County islands: James Island and Barren Island. It will be similar to the Poplar Island project in Talbot County, where dredge material is being used to rebuild a severely eroded island, restore wetlands and create wildlife habitat.

"It will be a large-scale Poplar Island," Brennan said, referring to the James Island project.

Brennan said the James Island "footprint" is 2,072 acres, with the project creating 1,140 acres of wetlands and 932 upland acres. The restored Poplar Island will have about 1,100 acres.

Because James Island is privately owned, a new island will be created adjacent to the existing island. Barren Island is federal property, so restoration will actually occur on the island.

The restored islands will serve as barriers, protecting land to the east by reducing erosion from the wind and water. Restoring James Island should benefit Taylors Island, and restoring Barren Island should benefit Hoopers Island.

Barren Island is a smaller project. It involves restoring 72 acres of wetlands by putting in 380,000 cubic yards of dredge material over seven years.

There's an ongoing need to find disposal sites for the sediments—clay, silt and mud—dredged from the Bay's shipping channels. Hamons said 3.2 million cubic yards is dredged every year. He said James Island will have the capacity to hold 90 million to 95 million cubic yards of material over about 30 years.

Hamons said construction at the James Island site should start in 2015, and it should be ready to take dredge material by 2018. He said the project cost estimate in 2005 was \$1.6 billion over 30 to 35 years.

Brennan said the feasibility report for the Mid-Bay island project will be submitted to the Corps of Engineers headquarters in early June, then go to a civil works review board in July. If the project gets the OK from the Corps chief in October, it could be placed in the next federal water resources development act, said Brennan. Then separate legislation must be approved by Congress to fund the project.

Del. Jeanie Haddaway, R-37B-Dorchester, asked about using dredge material to restore wetlands in the

Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge. Hamons said a study is in the "very early" stages. He said the best plan so far would be to use James Island as a staging area for a restoration project in the wildlife refuge, but a feasibility study for Blackwater would take about five years.

Del. Addie Eckardt, R-37B-Dorchester, thanked the members of the Dorchester Shoreline Erosion Group for their perseverance. She said rebuilding the islands is critical to stemming shoreline erosion.

Coyne said James and Barren islands served as barrier islands for the land masses to the east. As the islands eroded away, it led to significant erosion damage on the adjacent land masses.

Rebuilding James Island should also help rebuild aquatic life by reducing the silt coming into the river, said Coulson. He said the Little Choptank River used to be the biggest oyster producing river in Maryland.

It's important for counties like Talbot and Dorchester to have shoreline erosion plans, said Eckardt.

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