

Cecil Whig

Army Corps Seeks to Reopen County Dredge Spoils Site Earleville-area site could replace Poole's Island in Balt. Co.

By Cheryl Mattix

Officials from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers told the county commissioners Tuesday that they are considering depositing dredge spoils at an abandoned sand and gravel pit near Earleville.

Pearce Creek, which has been closed to dredge deposits since 1992, is now the top choice for replacing the Poole's Island dredge site near Middle River in Baltimore County when it closes Dec. 31, 2010, according to the corps' district office in Philadelphia.

The dredge spoils would come from a shipping channel between the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and the Port of Baltimore, according to army corps project manager Timothy J. Rooney.

"It's not an economically viable option to stop dredging the channel," Rooney told the county commissioners.

He said the Port of Baltimore generates \$1.5 billion in annual revenue, employs 16,000 people and is responsible for another 17,600 jobs indirectly linked to the port.

Rooney said another dredge spoil site at Courthouse Point near Chesapeake City also is being considered, along with Poplar Island in Talbot County.

Pearce Creek would be the most cost-efficient option because it is only 16 miles from the shipping channel, while Courthouse Point is 31 miles away and Poplar Island is 45 miles from the dredge site, officials said.

The Pearce Creek site also encompasses 260 acres and has 25 years of estimated use left, Rooney said. Courthouse Point, by comparison, has only about two years of capacity remaining, which would make it a poor long-term solution, he said.

"We need water quality certification from the Maryland Department of the Environment before we can use (Pearce Creek)," said Rooney, who added that the corps has hired experts from the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct water quality studies at Pearce Creek and West View Shores, a residential community near the site.

"At this point, the state won't approve Pearce Creek," he said. "There's been some questions about this site, including debates about the interpretation of previous studies."

Those debates have led the corps to pay for a third-party study by the U.S. Geological Survey.

Officials from the corps met with residents of West View Shores on Nov. 21 to inform them that the new study had begun about six weeks ago.

"We don't want to surprise anyone if residents see testing being conducted," corps' project manager Timothy J. Kelly told the county commissioners. "We already met with the MDE and we're making you aware today of what we are doing."

During the study, the USGS will monitor water levels in selected wells at Pearce Creek from December through August, he said. They also will monitor water levels in about 20 to 30 private wells in the West View Shores community during March or April and again in July or August.

Water quality samples also will be drawn from the Pearce Creek wells and about a dozen private wells in West View Shores from January to February, the corps officials said.

The USGS will present a progress report in June and its complete findings by the end of 2010 during public meetings to be scheduled later. Water level data and chemical analyses of individual private wells also will be provided during those meetings, the corps officials said.

County Commissioner Jim Mullin said he attended the corps' meeting with residents of West View Shores last month.

"It was very thorough and an interesting way to inform the community," he said.

Rooney said MDE approval for depositing dredge spoils at Pearce Creek could come with extra precautions, such as requiring the corps to install a protective liner at the spoil site.

"It won't be done the old way," he said.