

# New Hampshire Dredge Management Task Force Meeting Minutes – September 22, 2021

The meeting was held virtually on Wednesday, September 22, 2021 from 10:00 AM to approximately 11:45 PM using the Microsoft Teams platform.

## Participants (in alphabetical order):

Jean Brochi, Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)  
Phil Colarusso, EPA  
Mike Dionne, New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHF&G)  
Mark Habel, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE)  
Carol Henderson, NHF&G  
Aaron Hopkins, USACE  
Mike Johnson, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS)  
Eben Lewis, NHDES Wetlands Bureau  
Maureen Madray, Normandeau Associates, Inc.  
Erika Mark, USACE  
Melissa Paly, Conservation Law Foundation  
Alex Pelczar, Senator Collins  
Bonita Pothier, Senator King  
Todd Randall, USACE  
Jennifer Reczek, NH Department of Transportation (NHDOT)  
Chris Scott, Senator Shaheen  
Jenifer Thalhauser, USACE  
David Trubey, NH Division of Historical Resources  
Mike Walsh, USACE  
Chris Williams, Chair, NHDES Coastal Program  
Steve Wolf, EPA

## Legislative Update:

Chris Scott of Senator Shaheen's Office stated that the focus for the next couple of weeks is on passing a budget to avoid a government shutdown. He stated that the House of Representatives recently passed its budget and the Senate is now conducting its budget work. He stated that it's premature to discuss what might end up in the final budget but he indicated that he'd keep members apprised of anything that may affect the work of the Task Force.

Alex Pelczar of Senator Collins' Office and Bonita Pothier of Senator King's Office both confirmed that the Senate is focused on passing a budget in the next couple of weeks.

## Portsmouth Harbor/Piscataqua River Navigation Improvement Project:

The Portsmouth Harbor and Piscataqua River Navigation Improvement Project proposes to widen the existing turning basin located at the upstream end of the federal navigation channel in the Piscataqua River from 800 to 1,200 feet. The total volume of glacial till/sand to be dredged is approximately 600,000 cubic yards, while the volume of rock to be dredged is approximately 15,000 cubic yards. The USACE has received federal funding to construct the project and construction is scheduled to begin in the fall of 2021.

Erika Mark, Project Manager, from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) stated that the USACE anticipates awarding a contract for the work in the next few days. Mobilization is likely to begin in mid-October and construction is scheduled to begin in mid-November. The construction window is approximately five months. Unfortunately, due to a variety of factors, placement of approximately 300,000 cubic yards of material at Nantasket Beach in Hull, MA is no longer included in the final Project solicitation. However, the nearshore placement of approximately 300,000 cubic yards of material off Newbury and Salisbury, MA is still included in the solicitation for the Project. The material that was to be placed at Nantasket Beach will be placed at the recently designated Isles of Shoals North (IOSN) offshore disposal site. Ms. Mark stated that the decision to place the dredged material at IOSN instead of Nantasket Beach will not affect the timing of the Project. It will, however, result in significantly more trips to IOSN to dispose of material than originally anticipated.

Todd Randall, USACE, stated that in July the USACE held a virtual meeting with environmental and fisheries agencies from Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts to review the proposed haul routes to the beneficial reuse sites in Massachusetts and the IOSN disposal site. Now that placement of sand on Nantasket Beach site is no longer an option, the USACE is interested in reaching back out to ensure that fishermen, particularly from the lobster fishing industry, are aware that there will be approximately 60 additional scow trips to the IOSN disposal site (300,000 cubic yards of material / ~5,000 cubic yards of material per scow = ~60 scows). Both Carol Henderson and Mike Dionne of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHF&G) agreed that the USACE should make every effort to reach back out to the lobster fishing industry and to coordinate that outreach with NHF&G. Mr. Randall agreed to coordinate the outreach of the lobster fishing industry with NHF&G and the Maine Department of Marine Resources.

Mr. Randall then reminded members that the Project will impact approximately 39,200 square feet of eelgrass (*Zostera marina*) located in the Project side slopes. The USACE is proposing to mitigate for the direct loss of 39,200 square feet of eelgrass as well as the temporal loss of an additional 1,960 square feet of eelgrass by transplanting eelgrass from the Project site to one or more restoration sites located within the Piscataqua River estuary system deemed suitable for eelgrass restoration. In support of this effort, this summer the USACE harvested eelgrass from the Project site and transplanted it at three sites within the Piscataqua River estuary. Plots containing approximately 500 eelgrass plants were established at the three sites beginning in mid-June. The test plots were monitored several times during the course of the summer, most recently in mid-September. Unfortunately, none of the transplanted eelgrass at the three test sites survived.

Melissa Paly, the Conservation Law Foundation's Great Bay – Piscataqua Water Keeper, stated that a similar pilot-scale eelgrass restoration effort this summer in the Great Bay and Piscataqua River estuaries produced results similar to that of the USACE's. Although the effort involved two different restoration techniques using eelgrass transplanted from the Project site and one other site, eelgrass survival was extremely low.

Phil Colarusso, EPA, stated that naturally occurring eelgrass beds throughout New England are not doing as well this year as they have in the recent years. He believed this might be due to the extremely wet weather this summer. He stated that if naturally occurring beds are struggling it's not surprising that restored eelgrass beds are as well.

Discussion followed and focused on the potential causes that may have led to the failure of the transplanted eelgrass to survive. Algae, green crab predation, and wet weather, which may have resulted in reduced water clarity and increased nutrient loading, were all identified as potential causes.

Given the poor results of the USACE's eelgrass mitigation effort, Mr. Randall stated that the USACE intends to convene a workgroup of state and federal resource agency staff, scientists, and others to

assess the USACE's effort and identify next steps for mitigating the loss of eelgrass from the Project.

#### **Piscataqua River Simplex Shoal Maintenance Dredging:**

The USACE did not provide an update on this project during the meeting. Jenifer Thalhauser, Chief of the Navigation Branch of the USACE's New England District, did, however, provide a brief written update following the meeting. A summary of that update is provided below:

Based on discussions with the Portsmouth Pilots, it appears that areas that were last dredged in 2013 are not experiencing shoaling. Shoaling does, however, appear to be occurring in areas that were not dredged in 2013. The USACE needs to further investigate the areas where shoaling is occurring and determine whether or not its environmental (e.g., NEPA) documents include these areas. Project design and construction is contingent upon the availability of federal funds.

#### **Isles of Shoals Harbor of Refuge – Breakwaters Repair:**

This Isles of Shoals Harbor of Refuge federal navigation project consists of three breakwaters between four of the islands that comprise the Isles of Shoals. Two of the breakwaters are located in Maine waters, while the third breakwater, between Star Island and Cedar Island, is located in both Maine and New Hampshire waters. The Star Island-Cedar Island breakwater was last repaired in 1974. The USACE has received funding to repair the three breakwaters.

Mr. Habel, USACE, stated that the USACE has determined that a significant amount of the repair of the breakwater between Star Island and Cedar Island needs to be done from shore. This is because the ends of the breakwater can't be reached from barges. As a result, temporary stone access ramps will need to be built to get equipment and materials onshore to rebuild the ends of the breakwater. The USACE is currently in the process of trying to secure easements to allow access to the breakwater, including easements for the construction of the temporary stone access ramps. Mr. Habel stated that the primary issue currently facing the USACE is real estate access. Although the owner of Star Island supports the proposed work, ownership of Cedar Island is in question. There are multiple claimants to ownership of Cedar Island, which may pose problems for the USACE's ability to work on the island. If the ownership of Cedar Island cannot be resolved in a timely fashion, the USACE may have to consider not building the last 20-30 feet of the breakwater above the high water line on Cedar Island.

The USACE anticipates submittal of final design documents for internal review in the next couple of weeks. The USACE is also finalizing the draft Environmental Assessment for agency review in the next two to three weeks. Bid solicitation is expected in November. Construction is anticipated to begin in 2022 with an April 1 to November 30 construction window. Mr. Habel reminded members that due to safety concerns, the work cannot be done during the winter.

Todd Randall, USACE, stated that a survey of the harbor in the lee of the three breakwaters found scattered eelgrass behind the breakwater between Star Island and Cedar Island. He stated that the USACE has determined that the repair work will require a jack-up barge located next to the breakwater. As a result, impacts to eelgrass may occur. He stated that the contractor should be able to position the jack-up barge to avoid eelgrass, however, the USACE will monitor for eelgrass impacts. The draft Environmental Assessment will document the USACE's plans to mitigate for eelgrass impacts, if necessary. Discussion followed.

#### **Hampton Harbor Jetty Repair:**

This project involves the repair of the north jetty at the inlet to Hampton Harbor. The jetty was constructed in 1965 and last repaired in 2016. Storm events since 2016 have damaged the north jetty

and it is again in need of repair. The USACE have received \$4.5 million to complete the repairs to the north jetty. Based on the USACE's assessment of the north jetty, it is recommending that the stone size be increased to make the jetty more stable, less susceptible to storm damage, and reduce the frequency of repairs. Approximately 5,500 tons of existing small/undersized stone will need to be removed from the jetty to accommodate the larger stone. The USACE is looking at options for the re-use of the undersized stone and has contacted the NH Department of Natural and Cultural Resources – State Parks about using the rock to supplement the exiting rock that lines the northern side of the Hampton Harbor entrance channel, near the state's RV park.

Mark Habel, USACE, stated the USACE is currently in the process of drafting design documents and a draft Environmental Assessment (EA). The USACE hopes to release the draft EA for agency review soon. The USACE is targeting a late winter solicitation for the work, which will be conducted in the late summer/early fall of 2022. Mr. Habel also confirmed that the south jetty is in good condition and does not need to be repaired.

**Hampton Harbor Hydrodynamic Feasibility Study Federal Interest Determination:**

The USACE has received \$50K under its Section 107 (Small Harbors) Program to develop a federal interest determination (FID) regarding Hampton Harbor. The FID is essentially the USACE's assessment of whether it makes economic sense to invest federal dollars in a hydrodynamic feasibility study to determine what's causing the recurring shoaling in Hampton Harbor and how to alleviate it, or to continue to dredge the harbor every 5-7 years.

Mark Habel, USACE, confirmed that the USACE has received funding to develop the FID but until recently did not have the staff capacity to begin the work. The USACE's goal is to begin the FID this fall/winter. If the USACE determines that it's favorable to move forward with a hydrodynamic feasibility study of the harbor, the USACE will then execute a cost sharing agreement with the state sponsor, likely the Pease Development Authority Division of Ports and Harbors.

**Other Business:** None

Meeting adjourned at approximately 11:45am