



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Proposed Deepening of the Savannah Harbor

Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

The Savannah National Wildlife Refuge is one of the nation's wetland treasures. Managed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) as part of the National Wildlife Refuge System, the Refuge complex is visited by almost 600,000 people annually.

The Service is concerned about a Corps of Engineers/Georgia Ports Authority (GPA) plan to deepen the Savannah Harbor from 42 feet to 48 feet. This project may have serious negative impacts to the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge, to aquatic species reliant on the Savannah River, and to the coastal fishing and tourism economy.

Environmental Impacts of the Harbor Deepening Proposal



USFWS

Savannah Harbor

Impact to Savannah National Wildlife Refuge

When the Savannah National Wildlife Refuge was established in 1927, it contained about 6,000 acres of tidal freshwater marsh. This ecosystem is critical to the valuable Savannah River estuary. The future of sport fishing, commercial fishing, and tourism in Savannah depends on this environment. Past harbor deepening activities have caused the loss of 53% (3,200 acres) of the Refuge's tidal freshwater marsh. If not properly mitigated, the deepening could degrade 40% of the remaining tidal freshwater marsh. The proposed harbor deepening would also require refuge lands for the proposed channel realignment and enlargement of a turning basin.

Impact to Aquatic Species in the Savannah River

Prior to 1977, the Savannah River supported the most important striped bass population in the State of Georgia. Due to past harbor development, production of striped bass eggs in the Savannah River estuary has declined by about 95 percent since 1977. Federal and State natural resource agencies are working to restore this fishery. However, the proposed harbor deepening project could further degrade spawning habitat and alter river conditions needed for reproduction of these fish. The project will reduce dissolved oxygen levels in some areas of the Savannah River to levels that could impact endangered shortnose sturgeon and other aquatic life.

Proper Environmental Review of Project Required

The Savannah Harbor Expansion is authorized by Congress, but may be carried out only after the Secretary of the Army, in consultation with affected Federal, State and local entities, prepares and approves an Environmental Impact Statement for the project. The EIS must include an analysis of impacts of project depth alternatives ranging from 42 feet to 48 feet and a determination that the selected plan and the mitigation plan adequately address the potential environmental impacts. The Service is serving as a "cooperating agency" and is helping identify and evaluate EIS studies. GPA has formed a "stakeholder evaluation group" (SEG) to make recommendations concerning studies needed to evaluate the plan. The Service has worked with the SEG to identify needed studies. The studies are underway and are designed to provide information necessary for impact assessment and mitigation planning.

For more information contact

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