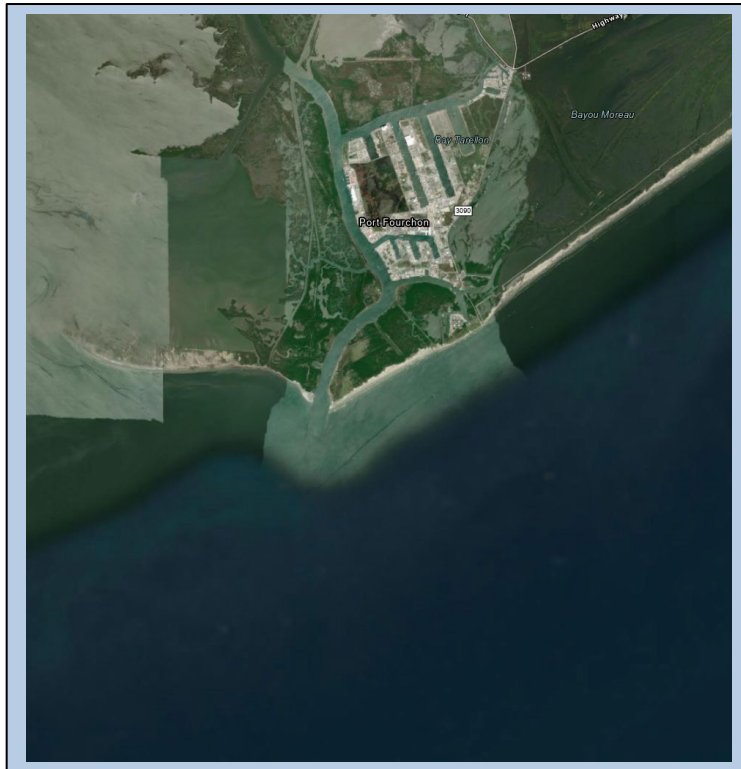




Port Fourchon Belle Pass Channel Deepening Project, Louisiana



Appendix B: Annex 1 - Final U.S. Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act Report

January 2025

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United States Department of the Interior

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
200 Dulles Drive
Lafayette, Louisiana 70506



July 26, 2024

Colonel Cullen Jones
District Commander
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Post Office Box 60267
New Orleans, Louisiana 70160-0267

Dear Colonel Jones:

Please reference the Port Fourchon West Belle Pass Channel, Louisiana, Feasibility Study conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE), with the Greater Lafourche Port Commission acting as the non-federal sponsor. Port Fourchon is located on the southern tip of Lafourche Parish, Louisiana, just north of the Gulf of Mexico. It is the southernmost point of Louisiana accessible by automobile, via Highway 1. The study area is located at the mouth of Bayou Lafourche. The Fish and Wildlife Service (Services) submits this letter report in accordance with the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act (FWCA; 48 Stat. 401, as amended; 16 U.S.C. 661 et seq.). This letter report constitutes the final report of the Secretary of the Interior as required by Section 2(b) of the FWCA. The National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) did not provide any comments on the Service's draft report.

The deepening of Port Fourchon was authorized by Section 203 of the Water Resources and Development Act (WRDA) of 1986 (PL 998-662), as modified by Section 1014 of Water Resources and Reform Development Act (WRRDA) 2014, by Section 1126 of the Water Infrastructure Improvements of the Nation Act (Public Law 114-322), and by Section 1152 of WRDS 2018. The project is conditionally authorized by WRDA 2020 Section 403.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The proposed action includes the deepening of the Port Fourchon federal navigation channel. Deepening would be achieved by the same dredging operation that is currently used for maintenance. The existing maintenance project was authorized for a navigation channel 300 feet (ft) wide with an elevation of -24 ft Mean Low Gulf (MLG) on the inland reach from mile 3.4 to Mile 0.0 and to an elevation of -26 ft MLG for the offshore reach from Mile 0.0 to Mile -1.3. The Port Fourchon federal navigation channel has been maintained by the USACE within the proposed action dimensions and alignment. The proposed action would dredge the federal navigation channel to an elevation of -30 ft Mean Lower Low Water (MLLW) for the inland reach plus 3 ft of advanced maintenance dredging and to -32 ft MLLW for the offshore reach plus 4 ft of advanced maintenance dredging (see Figure 1 below). The proposed action follows the alignment of the existing maintenance project and extends to the newly authorized limits. Dredging would be

accomplished with a hydraulic cutter-head dredge and material excavated would be transported to two sites in a slurry via pipeline. The two dredge material disposal sites are located on the exterior of the existing jetties near the intersection with the existing shoreline. Spoil discharge would be distributed within two active shallow water feeder berms parallel to the east and west beaches in the longshore transport zone (available for cross-shore and longshore sediment transport to the headlands flanking the jetties). Construction access for dredge, attendant plant, and discharge line is in open water.

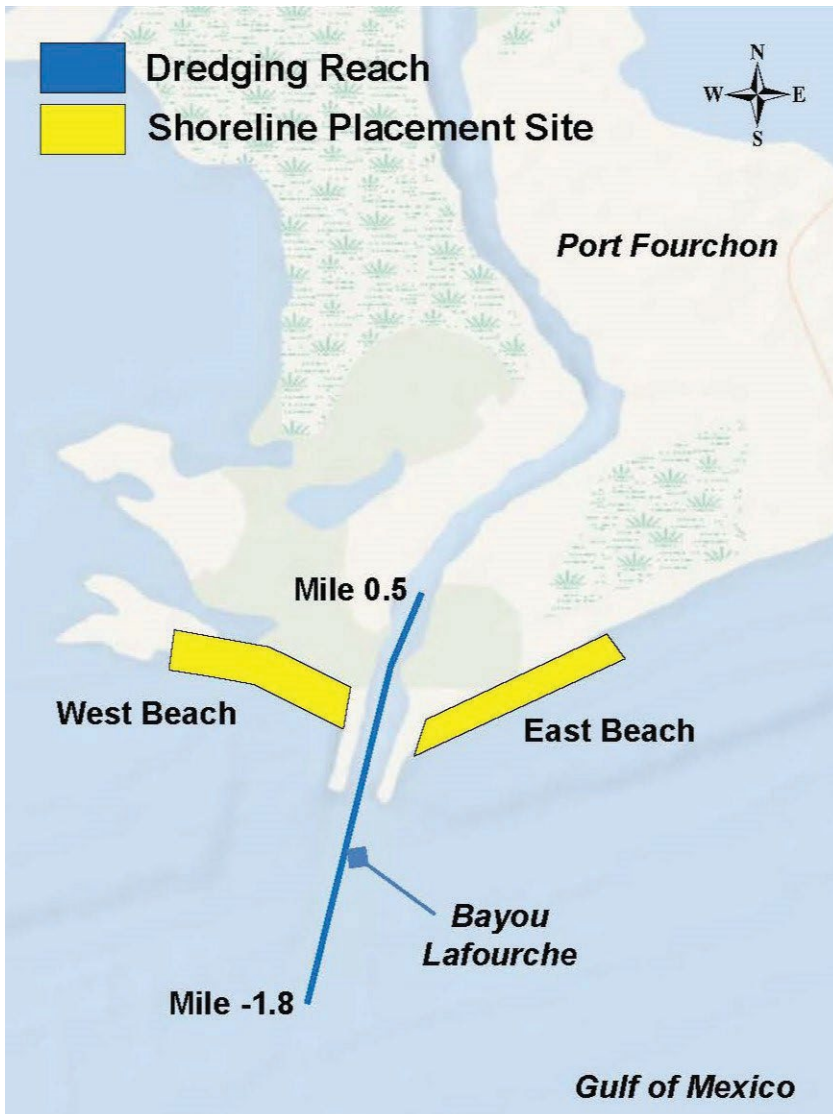


Figure 1. Proposed dredging and spoil placement for deepening of the Port Fourchon navigation channel.

FISH AND WILDLIFE RESOURCES

Fish and wildlife habitat found in the area of direct project impacts includes open water. Open water habitats to be directly impacted by the proposed project include the nearshore Gulf of Mexico

and Bayou Lafourche. Bayou Lafourche is currently dredged at frequent intervals to maintain access to existing port facilities. No vegetated wetlands would be impacted by the proposed project.

The area of direct project impacts provides minimal fish and wildlife habitat value. Dredging activities are expected to continue either with or without the project. Estuarine and marine fishes occurring in the direct impact project area include bay anchovies, scaled sardine, Gulf menhaden, striped mullet, and Atlantic croaker. Crustaceans expected to occur in this area include white shrimp, brown shrimp, and blue crab. Wildlife species that may be found foraging within the proposed project area include pelicans and various gulls and terns. Species in the project area may be temporarily disturbed by the noise associated with the proposed work, but these impacts are temporary in nature.

Fish and wildlife habitats adjacent to the project area include developed lands, salt marsh, open water, and barrier island/headlands.

Developed habitats adjacent to the project area include Louisiana Highway 1, shipyards, and the Greater Lafourche Port Commission. These habitats do not support significant wildlife use.

Marine processes, with barrier islands, saline marsh, tidal channels, and large bays and lakes, occur adjacent to the project area. Saline marshes adjacent to the project area are dominated by smooth cordgrass, glasswort, salt grass, and mangrove.

Barrier island/headlands adjacent to the project area include the Caminada headland and West Belle Pass Island. Habitat seen on barrier shorelines consists primarily of beach, dune, high marsh (scrub/shrub), and back-barrier saline marsh. Beach vegetation may include sea purslane (*Sesuvium portulacastrum*), marsh hay cordgrass (*Spartina patens*), sea rocket (*Cakile constricta*), and seaside heliotrope (*Heliotropium curassavicum*). Dune plants are dominated by sea oats (*Uniola paniculata* L.), but can include marsh hay cordgrass, bitter panicum (*Panicum amarum*), and Roseau cane (*Phragmites australis*). Shrub/scrub plants often found on high marsh zones typically behind dunes and include Eastern baccharis (*Baccharis halimifolia*), sea oxeye (*Borrchia frutescens*) and marsh elder (*Iva annua*). Black mangrove (*Avicennia germinans*) occurs as a shrub along the flooded marsh edges of the barrier islands and on the banks of tidal streams, ponds, and bays. Saline back barrier marshes species are dominated by smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*), glasswort (*Salicornia europaea*), salt grass (*Distichlis spicata*) and black mangrove.

Open water of various sizes and depths (ponds, lakes, bayous, and canals) are interspersed around the project area. Major open water areas include Bayou Lafourche, Bayou Moreau, the Gulf of Mexico, Timbalier Bay, and Bay Champagne. These open water areas support little or no submerged aquatic vegetation but support a diverse array fish and shellfish. Estuarine and marine fishes occurring in that area include bay anchovies (*Anchoa mitchilli*), scaled sardine (*Harengula pensacolae*), Gulf menhaden (*Brevoortia patronus*), striped mullet (*Mugil cephalus*), red drum (*Sciaenops ocellata*), spotted seatrout (*Cynoscion nebulosus*), sand seatrout (*Cynoscion arenarius*), Atlantic croaker (*Micropogon undulatus*) and southern flounder (*Paralichthys lethostigma*). The dominant crustaceans expected to occur in the area include white shrimp (*Litopenaeus setiferus*), brown shrimp (*Farfantepenaeus aztecus*), and blue crab (*Callinectes sapidus*).

Adjacent habitats to the project area provide habitat for a number of songbirds and shorebirds. Neotropical migrants expected in the project area include warblers, vireos, wrens, flycatchers, and

many other species. The barrier shoreline, scrub/shrub, ridge, spoil, or bayou bank habitats serve as vital resting, recovering, and foraging habitat for trans-Gulf neotropical migrant birds. Many of these wetlands have been lost in the vicinity of the project area as barrier islands and the few remaining ridges continue to subside below elevations that can support scrub/shrub habitat and maritime forest. Seabirds using adjacent open water areas and barrier shoreline may include pelicans, gulls, terns, and skimmers.

Mammals known to occur in the adjacent project-area wetlands include muskrat (*Ondatra zibethicus rivalicus*), nutria (*Myocaster coypus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), mink (*Mustela vison*), river otter (*Lutra canadensis*), swamp rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus*), Seminole bat (*Lasiurus seminolus*), Northern yellow bat (*Lasiurus intermedius*), marsh rice rat (*Oryzomys palustris*), bottlenose dolphin (*Tursiops truncatus*), and white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*).

THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES

Federally listed threatened and endangered species and their designated critical habitat occurring in and adjacent to the study area include the threatened West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), the threatened piping plover (*Charadrius melodus*) and its designated critical habitat, and the threatened red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*) and its proposed critical habitat. Several species of threatened and endangered sea turtles are also known to forage in the coastal waters adjacent to the project area. Those species include the threatened loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*), the endangered Kemp's ridley sea turtle (*Lepidochelys kempii*), the threatened green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), the endangered leatherback sea turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and the endangered hawksbill sea turtle (*Eretmochelys imbricate*).

West Indian Manatee

The threatened West Indian manatee is known to regularly occur in Lakes Pontchartrain and Maurepas and their associated coastal waters and streams. It also can be found less regularly in other Louisiana coastal areas, most likely while the average water temperature is warm. Based on data maintained by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' (LDWF) Wildlife Diversity Program, approximately 84 percent of reported manatee sightings (1990-2019) in Louisiana have occurred from the months of June through December. Manatee occurrences in Louisiana appear to be increasing and they have been regularly reported in the Amite, Blind, Tchefuncte, and Tickfaw Rivers, and in canals within the adjacent coastal marshes of southeastern Louisiana. Manatees may also infrequently be observed in the Mississippi River and coastal areas of southwestern Louisiana. Cold weather and outbreaks of red tide may adversely affect these animals. However, human activity is the primary cause for declines in species number due to collisions with boats and barges, entrapment in flood control structures, poaching, habitat loss, and pollution.

The following are conditions that should be implemented to avoid impacts to manatee. All contract personnel associated with the project shall be informed of the potential presence of manatees and the need to avoid collisions with manatees, which are protected under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973. All construction personnel are responsible for observing water-related activities for the presence of manatee(s). Temporary signs should be posted prior to and during all construction/dredging activities to remind personnel to be observant for manatees during active construction/dredging operations or within vessel movement

zones (i.e., work area), and at least one sign should be placed where it is visible to the vessel operator. Siltation barriers, if used, should be made of material in which manatees could not become entangled, and should be properly secured and monitored. If a manatee is sighted within 100 yards of the active work zone, special operating conditions should be implemented, including: no operation of moving equipment within 50 feet of a manatee; all vessels shall operate at no wake/idle speeds within 100 yards of the work area; and siltation barriers, if used, should be re-secured and monitored. Once the manatee has left the 100-yard buffer zone around the work area on its own accord, special operating conditions are no longer necessary, but careful observations would be resumed. Any manatee sighting should be immediately reported to the Service (337/291-3100) and the LDWF Wildlife Diversity Program (337/735-8676).

Piping Plover

The piping plover, federally listed as a threatened species, is a small (7 inches long), pale, sand-colored shorebird that winters in coastal Louisiana and may be present for 8 to 10 months annually. Piping plovers arrive from their northern breeding grounds as early as late July and remain until late March or April. They feed on polychaete marine worms, various crustaceans, insects and their larvae, and bivalve mollusks that they peck from the top of or just beneath the sand. Piping plovers forage on intertidal beaches, mudflats, sand flats, algal flats, and wash-over passes with no or very sparse emergent vegetation. They roost in unvegetated or sparsely vegetated areas, which may have debris, detritus, or micro-topographic relief offering refuge to plovers from high winds and cold weather. They also forage and roost in wrack (i.e., seaweed or other marine vegetation) deposited on beaches. In most areas, wintering piping plovers are dependent on a mosaic of sites distributed throughout the landscape, because the suitability of a particular site for foraging or roosting is dependent on local weather and tidal conditions. Plovers move among sites as environmental conditions change, and studies have indicated that they generally remain within a 2-mile area. Major threats to this species include the loss and degradation of habitat due to development, disturbance by humans and pets, and predation.

On July 10, 2001, the Service designated critical habitat for wintering piping plovers (Federal Register Volume 66, No. 132); a map of the seven critical habitat units in Louisiana can be found [here](#). Their designated critical habitat identifies specific areas that are essential to the conservation of the species. The physical and biological features (PBFs) for piping plover wintering habitat are those habitat components that support foraging, roosting, and sheltering and the physical features necessary for maintaining the natural processes that support those habitat components. The PBFs are found in geologically dynamic coastal areas that contain intertidal beaches and flats (between annual low tide and annual high tide), and associated dune systems and flats above annual high tide. Important components of intertidal flats include sand and/or mud flats with no or very sparse emergent vegetation. Adjacent unvegetated or sparsely vegetated sand, mud, or algal flats above high tide are also important, especially for roosting plovers.

Red Knot

The red knot (*Calidris canutus rufa*), federally listed as a threatened species, is a medium-sized shorebird about 9 to 11 inches in length with a proportionately small head, small eyes, short neck, and short legs. The black bill tapers steadily from a relatively thick base to a relatively fine tip; bill length is not much longer than head length. Legs are typically dark gray to black, but sometimes greenish in juveniles or older birds in non-breeding plumage. Non-breeding plumage is dusky gray

above and whitish below. The red knot breeds in the central Canadian arctic but is found in Louisiana during spring and fall migrations and the winter months (generally September through early May).

During migration and on their wintering grounds, red knots forage along sandy beaches, tidal mudflats, salt marshes, and peat banks. Observations along the Texas coast indicate that red knots forage on beaches, oyster reefs, and exposed bay bottoms, and they roost on high sand flats, reefs, and other sites protected from high tides. In wintering and migration habitats, red knots commonly forage on bivalves, gastropods, and crustaceans. Coquina clams (*Donax variabilis*), a frequent and often important food resource for red knots, are common along many gulf beaches. Major threats to this species along the Gulf of Mexico include the loss and degradation of habitat due to erosion, shoreline stabilization, and development; disturbance by humans and pets; and predation.

On July 15, 2021, the Service proposed to designate 649,066 acres of critical habitat across 13 states for the rufa red knot. The critical habitat proposal reinforces the importance of habitat for recovery and focuses conservation in the areas along the coasts with the most rufa red knot activity. The proposal includes occupied migration and wintering areas of Alabama, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Mississippi, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Virginia. About 40 percent of the acres overlap with existing critical habitat for other threatened and endangered species.

Sea Turtles

There are five species of federally listed threatened or endangered sea turtles that forage in the near shore waters, bays, and estuaries of Louisiana. The NMFS is responsible for aquatic marine threatened or endangered species that occur in the marine environment. Please contact Kelly Shotts (727-824-5312) at the NMFS Regional Office in St. Petersburg, Florida, for information concerning those species in the marine environment.

The Service completed Endangered Species Act (ESA) section 7 consultation with the USACE on June 10, 2024. Please reference that documentation for any further ESA-related questions or information.

Essential Fish Habitat

The project may be located within an area identified as Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA, Magnuson-Stevens Act; P.L. 104-297). The USACE should consult with the NMFS regarding EFH.

SERVICE RECOMMENDATIONS

As described above, the area of direct project impacts provides minimal fish and wildlife habitat value; however, incorporating beneficial use of the dredged material, resulting from the construction and maintenance of this project, into the project design would help restore coastal habitats in the area that are in a state of decline.

The Service recommends that the following fish and wildlife conservation recommendations are included in the feasibility report and related authorizing documents:

1. The Service recommends that to the extent feasible all dredged material should be used beneficially to restore coastal habitats that are in decline. In doing so, saline wetlands would benefit by providing sediments and nutrients into the system, directly creating marsh, reducing open water, and reducing wave fetch, thus helping to combat wetland loss in the area.
2. We recommend that the USACE contact the Service for additional ESA consultation if:
1) the scope or location of the proposed project is changed significantly; 2) new information reveals that the action may affect listed species or designated critical habitat; 3) the action is modified in a manner that causes effects to listed species or designated critical habitat; or 4) a new species is listed, or critical habitat designated. Additional consultation because of any of the above conditions or for changes not covered in the June 10, 2024, consultation should occur before changes are made and or finalized.

In summary, the Service does not object to the implementation of the Port Fourchon West Belle Pass Channel, Louisiana project as currently described since the proposed project would not significantly impact federal trust fish and wildlife resources. We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the proposed project. If your staff have any questions regarding our comments, please have them contact Karen Soileau of this office at (337) 291-3132.

Sincerely,



BRIGETTE FIRMIN Digitally signed by BRIGETTE FIRMIN
Date: 2024.07.26 13:02:29 -05'00'

Brigitte D. Firmin

Field Supervisor

Louisiana Ecological Services Office

cc: LDWF, Baton Rouge, LA (Attn: Mike Perot and Nicole Lorenz)
NMFS, Baton Rouge, LA
Environmental Protection Agency, Dallas, TX
CEMVN-PM-R, New Orleans, LA
LA Dept. of Natural Resources (CMD), Baton Rouge, LA