

By COLONEL THOMAS F. JULICH
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Morgan City's port is important to the Army Corps of Engineers. As District Engineer of the Corps' New Orleans District, let me make it clear that we place a strong emphasis on maintaining relationships in our partnership with the leaders, public and private, who represent the Morgan City area's water commerce and flood-control safety needs.

Please let me say a few things about the Corps' role in this partnership, because of the concern expressed by state Sen. Butch Gautreaux in a recent column in this and other newspapers. We have striven to fulfill our side of the partnership, and are keeping alert for what we may need to do to maintain this partnership. Here are some facts.

One of the biggest concerns is dredging of the Atchafalaya River to assure the federally authorized depth of 20 feet. As this issue has become more and more worrisome, we have responded. Over the past 1½ years we have greatly increased our dredging at Morgan City. We have kept a dredge working nine to 10 months of the year, an exceptional span of time for any waterway. Fiscal-year costs of the Corps' operations and maintenance project in this area have risen from \$2.3 million in 1980 to \$11.2 million in 2001. This program has become proportionally one of the most costly programs in the New Orleans District.

Lately, we have had one or even two cutterhead dredges working in the bar channel under the third dredging contract to be awarded this year. The third contract is an increase from the one or two contracts that we have historically awarded annually at Morgan City.

Our plan is to have a dredge working in the channel on a continuous basis until the "fluff" issue is resolved to maintain the authorized depth of 20 feet. Fluff is a dense layer that forms where fresh and salt water meet. All of us recognize that it is a serious problem. It is a tenacious foe to navigation that defies easy solution. So, we have asked our research laboratory, the Waterways Experiment Station (WES) to conduct a study of fluff at Morgan City and make recommendations for a solution. The WES study is under way and is expected to take 15 months to complete. All concerned would like to have the study completed in less time, and we are working with WES in an attempt to do this.

Also, at the request of the Morgan City Harbor and Terminal District, we are working to get authorization to dispose of the dredged materials on the west side of the channel. This is another matter that requires time. We are moving as quickly as possible on this and expect to have clearance for the disposal site in seven to nine months.

In dredging at Morgan City, our practice is to dredge to a depth of 24 feet. Advancing the maintenance of the channel lets us get ahead of the sediment at least temporarily in our efforts to maintain a 20-foot channel. We have asked the sediment experts at WES to design sections for a live test in the river of whether dredging even deeper would improve the channel's reliability. This will require environmental clearance. In the test, we would dredge five sections, measuring a total of 5.5 miles, to a depth of 28 feet. These tests will be evaluated as part of the WES fluff study to provide the facts on whether going even deeper will get the job done.

We have worked closely with the port of Morgan City on all of these endeavors and will continue to do so. In closing I would like to mention two illustrations of this.

One is the La. Highway 70/Lake Palourde, LA shoreline protection and restoration project. The project has been a success because of partnership of the Corps, the city of Morgan City, St. Mary Parish, the port authorities, and other local interests. La. 70 is one of the Morgan City area's hurricane-evacuation routes, and this project will shield it from the lake's erosive power. Our partnership enabled us to work out a plan to use material dredged from Berwick Bay Harbor to create 50 acres of emergent land between the rock dike and the former shoreline. The final phase of construction will include the placement of additional dredged material, in the spring of 2002.

Another cooperative story in the Corps-Morgan City relationship is a study that is looking into a 35-foot channel for the Atchafalaya River that is advocated by Morgan City leaders. This is called a reconnaissance (preliminary) study. Results of the study, which is to be completed this month, will tell us whether it is warranted to proceed to a feasibility study. It appears that the reconnaissance will be favorable to proceeding to the feasibility study. Feasibility studies are detailed studies undertaken to determine economic feasibility and environmental acceptability of a potential federal project.

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December 5, 2001

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