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San Francisco Bay dredging fuels an unexpected concern: climate change

By Kurtis Alexander

What began as an unremarkable bid to deepen a shipping channel in San Francisco Bay, making it easier for cargo vessels to come and go, has become a flash point in the debate over climate change.

Environmental groups are blasting plans by the Army Corps of Engineers to dredge 13 miles of waterways inside the Golden Gate because the work would benefit ships delivering oil to East Bay refineries.

At a recent public meeting, more than 100 people packed a library in Pinole to voice their concerns that the proposal would encourage the oil industry to expand, hastening greenhouse gas emissions and global warming. A petition delivered to the Army Corps with 20,000 signatures seeks to "stop Trump from dredging San Francisco Bay."

"When we need to be phasing out fossil fuels, this dredging project does just the opposite," said Jason Pfeifle, a climate campaigner for the Center for Biological Diversity, one of many environmental groups opposing the proposal. "There is no reason we should be dredging."

The protest comes amid growing unease across the nation about the conveyance of fossil fuels, be it by pipeline, railroad or boat. Criticism of expanding petroleum operations has intensified under President Trump, who has supported the expansion of the oil, gas and coal industries, and called climate change a hoax.

Officials with the Army Corps say that their only concern in San Francisco Bay is ensuring safe passage of boats. They emphasize that their purview is not climate nor the fossil fuel industry.

"That's a valuable discussion to have, but it's not the Corps of Engineer's authority to address," said Stu Townsley, the agency's deputy for project management in its San Francisco office. "I try hard to keep the corps as agnostic as I can."

The [agency's \\$60 million plan](#), put forth in April, calls for deepening two stretches of water along a route that serves nine oil-receiving terminals and four refineries in Contra Costa and Solano counties. The refineries, operated by Shell, Tesoro, Phillips 66 and Valero, import crude oil and export refined petroleum products like gasoline.

The Army Corps currently maintains the shipping lane to the sites at a depth of 35 feet, but it was initially authorized by Congress to extend to 45 feet. Agency officials say the time has come to deepen the channel, to 38 feet, because of the need to serve bigger and heavier ships.

As it stands, a lot of boats don't have the underwater clearance to carry full loads and must "light load" and make multiple trips to move supplies. Meanwhile, the demand for crude oil is skyrocketing in California as oil production in the state has slowed and fails to keep up with the needs of residents. The void has been filled by crude shipments from Saudi Arabia, Ecuador and Colombia.

The Army Corps estimates that the dredging project would save \$10 million annually in shipping costs, a savings that officials say would be passed to consumers in the form of less-expensive gas.

The Western States Petroleum Association, which represents the Bay Area refineries, declined to comment on the plan.

Under the proposal, the Army Corps would deepen 10.3 miles near Richmond in the northern part of San Francisco Bay, also known as San Pablo Bay, and 2.9 miles inside the Carquinez Strait beneath the Benicia Martinez Bridge.

The work involves removing about 1.6 million cubic yards of mud and silt from the bottom of the waterways, according to the plan. The dredged material would be used for habitat restoration and development of wetlands to help counter rising sea levels in the region.

Opponents of the project not only take issue with the climate impacts of fossil fuels but the risk of more oil spills and more air pollution as bigger ships come into the bay and refinery operations potentially increase.

"It's an environmental issue and a health issue all in one," said Isabella Zizi, a resident of El Cerrito and campaigner for the group Stand.earth. Zizi held a sign at the meeting by the Army Corps this month that read: "Protect the Bay."

While the Army Corps commonly dredges to maintain waterways at prescribed depths, deepening projects are more occasional. One of the region's last big dredging exercises was the deepening of the bay floor to 50 feet near the Port of Oakland, which wrapped up in 2009.

The benefits of the newly planned dredging wouldn't be limited to the fossil fuel industry. Among the more than 300 big ships that make the route each year are many that carry agricultural and construction goods.

Initial plans to extend the deepening work another 60 miles to the Port of Stockton, where many of the non-petroleum commodities go, however, were put off because of cost.

"We were a little disappointed that it's not coming all the way," said Jeff Wingfield, the port's director of environmental and public affairs. "But (the dredging covers) a portion of the channel that the ships use to get to Stockton."

Stockton's top imports include fertilizers that nourish Central Valley farms and components for Teslas, which are assembled in Fremont. Crops such as rice are among its major exports.

The Stockton port is the local sponsor of the Army Corps project, which means it's responsible for helping cover part of the cost. The federal government usually picks up half the tab.

Still, several hurdles remain before work can proceed. In addition to the federal environmental review, which was included in the April plan, a state environmental review must be done. At this point, no local agency has stepped up to do the pricey and controversial evaluation.

Congress also must appropriate the funding for the project.

Townsley, with the Army Corps, estimates that even without major hiccups, it could be a decade before planning and construction of the deeper channel is complete.

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