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Corps of Engineers has turn in river deepening

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VANCOUVER -- On the question of whether to deepen the Columbia River navigation channel, the next step is to wait.

Clark County's boaters have been heard. So have economic development advocates.

Three state agencies -- one from Washington and two from Oregon -- have heard testimony, and more written comments are expected to arrive before Wednesday's cutoff.

But no decisions can be made until the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes a supplemental environmental study. No completion timeline has been released.

The 40-foot-deep channel cannot accommodate the newest generation of bigger ships, which need 43 feet of water.

This week's hearing was before the Washington Department of Ecology and Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality and the Land Conservation and Development Commission.

The three agencies halted the \$155.6 million project two years ago when additional information was requested.

Any of the three could torpedo the project, but at the hearing agency representatives seemed more concerned about not producing conflicting requirements, thus making compliance impossible.

Area boaters would like an additional hearing limited to effects on Martin Island, a 278-acre parcel 23 miles downstream from the I-5 bridge.

Boaters, fish use lagoon Boaters often gather at the island's 32-acre lagoon, which the corps wants to use as a repository for dredge material.

That island, just south of Kalama in Cowlitz County, is part of the lowland holdings of brothers Bob and Richard Colf, Clark County developers.

Although they are not taking a position on the dredging, the Colfs don't want the lagoon filled, said Roy Heikkala, their spokesman. Both in the hearing and in a separate interview, Heikkala said that "the boaters have been good citizens."

But he said the Army Corps of Engineers is not interested the Colfs' wishes or their offer of other islands as dump sites for dredged sand and rocks.

Other riverside property owners also said they have been unsuccessful when offering free dumping sites to the corps.

Heikkala said one of the stated goals of the channel deepening is to create new fish habitat, but filling the lagoon would destroy the pan fish that live there. He said the project calls for using 736 acres of lowlands between Vancouver and Astoria for dredging spoils, and of that, 662 acres are in Washington.

More than 500 acres would be from the Colf family, Heikkala said, "which seems unfair."

Loree Randall, project manager for the state Department of Ecology, will be making the decision on Martin Island. The island, an adjacent slough and nearby Martin Bluff are named for a massive colony of purple martins that once nested there.

Witnesses from Clark County at this week's hearing included: Bart Phillips, president of Columbia River Economic Development Council, who said: The project is critical to the area economy, and two extra years of scrutiny has made this a better package. Ginger Metcalf, executive director of Identity Clark County, who said: The deepening channel would allow larger ships to call in Vancouver and Portland. Otherwise, goods would be imported and exported via Seattle or San Francisco. "We cannot afford extra trucks on our roads. The river with which we are blessed offers that opportunity." John Fratt, Port of Vancouver, who said: To keep its position as a leading grain export route, the Columbia River needs to be deepened. He said the local area benefits by shipping grains from as far away as Nebraska and Kansas. Vinton Erickson, farmer, developer and representative of the Washington State Farm Bureau: "I think this has been studied to death. I read we have more fish than at any time in the past 40 years." Bill Stewart: 360-896-5722; 503-294-5900; billstewart@news.oregonian.com