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Proposed River Dredging to Clear way for Destroyer Makes Waves

04/07/2011 Reported By: [Susan Sharon](#)

This September the U.S. Navy Destroyer, the Spruance, is scheduled to depart Bath Iron Works for commissioning. The ship is considered critical to national defense. But in order to safely navigate it down the Kennebec River, the Navy and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers want to dredge the river in two places. Their proposed dredging would take place in August during the height of the summer tourism season in a region that depends on tourists--and local residents are worried it will wipe them out.

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Around the Popham Beach State Park and the nearby town of Phippsburg, August is the month to go swimming, catch a ferry to nearby Sequin Island, charter a fishing boat and just hang out and enjoy the Maine coast. It's also the time of year when the waters off of Popham are thick with lobsters.

"There's so much competition that you could almost walk on the trap bouys out there," says Brett Gillam, a third generation lobstermen from Small Point who fishes 600 traps in the area. The Navy wants to remove about 20,000 cubic yards of sandy material from the mouth of the Kennebec River near Popham Beach and another 50,000 cubic yards from Doubling Point near Bath. That way, the billion-dollar Navy destroyer should be able to depart Bath Iron Works and navigate down the Kennebec without getting stuck.

Some of the dredged material would be disposed of at a place called Jackknife Ledge, which is also not far from the Popham Beach State Park and Gillam's lobster beds. And he worries the three-to-five week dredging operation will kill the lobsters and force him and about 20 other lobstermen to relocate their traps.

"Well, if you was laying on the ground and somebody dumped 10 tons of sand on top of you, it would smother you!" he says. "We'll have to move our gear out of there and it's gonna scrunch it all together in the other area that we have and--not a good thing. Not really."

"It's one of the most popular state parks in Maine and they are going to park a giant vacuum cleaner 100-feet off the beach," says attorney Steve Hinchman, who represents a coalition of local business owners and residents who think dredging 24/7 in the month of August will cripple the local economy.

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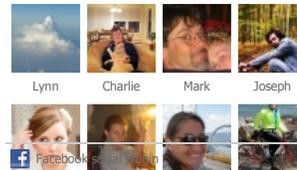
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"Every hour, they move the barge a couple hundred yards off the beach, open the bay doors and drop tons of slurry into the water," Hinchman says.

Instead of hearing the soothing sound of surf at night, Hinchman says tourists at a nearby bed and breakfast will hear the sound of a giant vacuum.

And then there's the possibility that sediment will contaminate local clam flats. Dean Doyle says he and about 40 other clambers make about half their income digging clams in July and August. He says they've been told by the Maine Department of Marine Resources that the clam flats may have to be closed while testing takes place to make sure clams are safe to eat.

And Doyle questions why the Navy, the U.S. Corps of Engineers and Bath Iron Works want the work done in August. "My father has worked there since I was a young kid," he says. "That's what paid for my school clothes, paid for my groceries. I see that they need to dredge. The ships need to leave. The guys up there need to work, but we also down here need to make a living too. And I think that there are many other options for 'em."

Just last month, Doyle and other residents say they saw the Spruance enter and exit the river just fine without any dredging. BIW spokesman Jim DiMartini says there's a simple reason: The Kennebec is deep enough right now. But it might not be after a long, hot summer.

"If we have an unusually dry spring and summer, and the runoff is less than normal, we could have sufficient bottom buildup that will preclude the ship from passing down the river, either in the channel or to the east of the channel, or whatever," DiMartini says. "On the flip side of that, if we get a lot of runoff, those sand bars and fingers could be washed right out and we might not have a problem at all."

In other words, if it's a wet summer, dredging might not be necessary. But the Navy has to plan either way. And William Kavanaugh of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers says the month of August is necessary because of the lead time it takes to notify the public, get comments, coordinate state and federal agencies and procure the funding.

"We were informed that there was an issue by the Navy in, I believe, late November of 2010," he says. "So, you know we couldn't have just turned on a dime and done dredging in, say, November."

In addition, Kavanaugh says it's more difficult to carry out dredging during the winter months because of ice flows. But he says concerns raised by residents about disruption to the tourist season will be considered.

The public comment period closed in March. And a final decision is expected in the next month, pending approval of a couple of permits from the state. Meanwhile, Maine Congresswoman Chellie Pingree is getting involved.

"BIW is a very important part of our economy in the state and obviously moving a ship is critical," Pingree says. "And we also want to make sure that our fishermen don't experience any challenges, so we're going to do everything we can to solve the problem."

One of the possible solutions, Pingree says, may be changing the timing of the planned dredging.

Photos by Susan Sharon

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