

Court clears way for Snake River dredging

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Capital Press

Published:
January 7, 2015 2:59PM

Dredging of the lower Snake River will begin next week after a federal judge ruling that allows the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to proceed.

A federal judge has cleared the way for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to proceed with dredging the lower Snake River.

Work will begin about Jan. 12.

U.S. District Judge James Robart on Jan. 5 denied a request by environmental groups and the Nez Perce Tribe for a preliminary injunction that would have stopped maintenance of the channel and related port berthing areas near Lewiston, Idaho, and Clarkston, Wash., according to the corps.

“There is a current immediate need to re-establish the federal navigation channel at congressionally authorized dimensions,” Lt. Col. Timothy Vail, district commander for the corps in Walla Walla, Wash., said in the press release.

Maintenance dredging last took place in the lower Snake River navigation channel in the winter of 2005-2006.

“This is really the end of a long and contentious road where the Corps of Engineers has had to defend their plans to restore safe and efficient navigation to the lower Snake River,” said Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

Barge traffic is important for Pacific Northwest wheat farmers and other producers, who rely on the river to access international markets via ports downstream on the Columbia River, Meira said.

“We need all modes of transportation — river, rail and roads — to be in peak operating condition, and this gets our river back to where we need it to be,” she said.

“The value of the dredging is that it’s maintaining a national waterway,” said Glen Squires, CEO of the Washington Grain Commission. “It’s just essential that we maintain the infrastructure we’ve got that allows wheat to be moved on the river. The river’s not only a competitive option, but it’s an essential capacity for moving commodities.”

Bob Cox, general manager of Pomeroy Grain Growers in Pomeroy, Wash., said his company moves all its wheat on the river.

“Keeping the channel 14 feet deep and 250 feet wide is very important to us, and this dredging will be a big benefit to all the grain shippers on the river,” Cox said.

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Once dredging is completed, the company will be able to load barges to the maximum weight, roughly 4,000 tons, which Cox said saves money. When the river isn't dredged to the 14-foot depth, companies such as his load less wheat on the barges, costing a few thousand dollars extra per barge. Pomeroy Grain Growers loads between 80 and 90 barges each year, Cox said.

The portion of the river doesn't need to be dredged as often as others, which require annual dredging, but shoals constantly shift.

"Even our longest-serving tugboat captains can have a difficult time moving through the area safely," Meira said. "No one wants to see an accident or grounding that results in harm to a person or the environment."

Dredging will take place for approximately six weeks. It was originally slated to begin in early December.

The inland Columbia-Snake River system is used to transport roughly 10 million tons of cargo each year, Meira said.