



600 S.E. BAY BOULEVARD NEWPORT, OREGON 97365 PHONE (541) 265-7758 FAX (541) 265-4235 www.portofnewport.com

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CONTACT: Paula Miranda
(541)265-7758

Shrinking in-water work window hinders Port

(Newport, Ore) Changes in Oregon regulations that dictate when in-water work can occur in waterways around the state have contributed to a potentially costly problem for the Port of Newport.

The Port is contractually required to dredge the dock area for its largest tenant - the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) located in South Beach. That maintenance typically occurs every two or three years, making it one of the Port's most costly obligations as landlord to the federal agency's Pacific headquarters.

In 2022, the State of Oregon instituted some unexpected changes to the calendar of allowable dates for in-water work around the state. The new schedule shaved two weeks off the already challenging limitations for the Yaquina estuary, according to Port officials. Previously, permitted in-water work could occur locally from Nov. 1 through Feb. 15. In 2022, the period was shortened to end Feb 1.

"When you look at the state's or region's dredging jobs as one big work list, and then the state pinches that into a smaller time, it requires more dredgers to come in," explained Port Director of Operations Aaron Bretz.

The Port had a contractor lined up to do the work, but the tightening of the schedule may push the Port to contract with a new dredging company. At the Port Commission meeting on Tuesday, Bretz told commissioners the cost may increase by up to \$500,000 more if a new company has to mobilize equipment and personnel to the area.

Timing the work is a complicated proposition for the Port, since NOAA vessels may be at the pier, and expecting them to move the fleet is difficult if ship maintenance is underway.

General Manager Paula Miranda said she is working with her peers and others around the state to raise the issue with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, as well as state legislators. For his part, Bretz is exploring the option of securing a variance for the in-water work window.

"The Army Corps is going to be in dredging this year as they always are. If they would just let us do our dredging around that same time, the bay will go through that stress and heal over, instead of having to dredge once in the summer and again in the fall," he explained. Whether that logic will appeal to state decisionmakers is unknown. The Army Corps normally dredges between June and October, so the Port will seek out an exception that allows dredging at the NOAA dock to begin earlier in the fall.

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