Compromise reached on dredge work

By BOB ANDERSON
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The state Department of Natural Resources will allow emergency dredging on lower portions of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, where shoaling has restricted vessel traffic. DNR is holding firm, however, in refusing to allow dredging in an area where the outlet threatens to break through to Lake Borgne.

Meanwhile, the state is trying to get federal funding to stop that breakthrough, which coastal experts say would be catastrophic to Lake Borgne's fisheries.

Because of the shoaling in the lower part of Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, an advisory was issued last week against the use of the outlet by vessels with drafts of more than 22 feet.

That brought a public cry for action from the Port of New Orleans, which previously has been funding privately with DNR over the dredging issue.

Port officials say thousands of jobs depend on MRGO traffic.

After meeting with port officials, DNR agreed to compromise and allow dredging on the lower part of the channel. DNR also said it will not allow the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to dredge the portion of the channel where the potential for a breakthrough exists, unless the corps agrees to take measures to rebuild some of the marsh that the MRGO has eaten away.

The corps says it is not authorized to spend funds to do what the state wants, so state officials are seeking help from their congressional delegation in locating the needed $3 million.

By the end of the week, the corps will be given approval to go ahead with dredging in the southern part of the channel, DNR Secretary Ron Gomez said Wednesday.

That should halt the immediate crisis, but the corps is predicting that shoaling in the outlet near Lake Borgne could be a problem in four months, Gomez said.

"The entire fishery of Lake Borgne is being threatened" by this saltwater channel that has already cut through a large portion of adjacent marsh and is about to break through the wetlands that remain between the waterway and the lake, according to Dave Sollese, DNR's assistant secretary, in charge of coastal matters.

Gonzalez and Sollese want the corps to erect a metal wall along the bank and spread the dredged spoil behind it to replace some of the marsh habitat that has been lost.

DNR says the gulf outlet has swelled far beyond its original banks and even out of the government owned right-of-way.

St. Bernard Parish officials have long complained about the wetland loss and saltwater intrusion caused by the channel and began requesting bank stabilization measures in 1973.