Corps begins dredge work

By BOB ANDERSON
Environmental editor

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began maintenance dredging on the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet Thursday after a long environmental fight with the state and without making concessions the state had sought to protect Lake Borgne.

The kind of bank stabilization project the state wants will have to be authorized by Congress, Col. Richard Gorski, head of the corps' New Orleans District, said in an interview Thursday.

It should take less than 90 days for the dredging, "which began at first light Thursday," to restore the channel so it can be used by vessels with a 36-foot draft.

Officials with the Port of New Orleans said they were being hurt by the fact vessels with that deep of a draft could no longer use the channel.

State officials tried unsuccessfully to use their ability to forbid dredging to force the corps to take action to protect adjacent wetlands and waterbodies.

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If the corps doesn't do something about the ever-widening channel, it will break through the remaining wetlands and pour saltwater into Lake Borgne, ruining the important fishery in that lake, state officials say.

Gorski said he is willing to work with the state in trying to get a bank stabilization project approved, but it is unlikely to happen before late fall 1992 unless the state pushes its delegation to act sooner.

"I have to follow the rules of the Corps of Engineers," Gorski said Thursday. "That process is time-consuming. Projects have to compete on a nationwide basis."

Earlier in the week, the Louisiana Department of Natural Resources gave in to the corps and approved the dredging.

DNR agreed Monday to allow the corps to dredge MRGO one time so ships can continue using the channel to reach the Port of New Orleans.

The state agency had refused earlier to allow the dredging on the basis the corps is not meeting state regulations because it is not using the spoil to help mitigate the environmental damage MRGO is causing.

DNR wants the corps to create a solid bank to prevent MRGO from growing ever wider and to put the spoil behind that bank to rebuild some of the marsh the waterway has eroded.

But DNR had to give in on its position because of "the economic and social repercussions of continued restriction to navigation which, according to the Port of New Orleans, would result should such dredging not occur," DNR said in a letter sent to the corps.