Pontchartrian dredging is shut down by state DEQ

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Shell-dredging operations in Lake Pontchartrain were ordered shut down Friday after the Department of Environmental Quality determined that turbidity from the dredges is having an adverse effect on the lake and its aquatic life.

The dredges were shut down before noon Friday, according to a spokesman for Dravo Basic Materials, who called the state’s action “an emotional, politically popular decision.”

“Shell dredging cannot be undertaken in a manner which will adequately protect the environment,” Maureen O’Neill, DEQ’s assistant secretary in charge of water quality, said in a 17-page opinion that resulted from days of hearings. “There is really no way to effectively minimize turbidity associated with shell dredging in the lake.”

The action has no impact on shell dredging off the Louisiana coast, where an estimated 60 percent of shells are taken.

“There has been a dramatic shift from hard to soft bottoms (in Lake Pontchartrain) due to the absence of clam shells and shell hash,” O’Neill found. “There has also been a dramatic reduction in the available food supply for bottom-feeding fishes, shrimp and crabs.”

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The decision will put hundreds of people out of work, said Peter Franklin of Dravo.

“Shell dredging does produce economic benefits such as employment and revenues from the sale of shell,” O’Neill noted in her findings.

But she said a clean lake “would create many new jobs as a result of the lake being used for recreational purposes such as swimming, tubing and water skiing. A clean lake could increase tourism in the area.”

She also indicated a halt to dredging could have a positive impact on commercial fishing in the lake.

“The open area of the lake that is exposed or subjected to shell dredging is characterized by low species diversity,” O’Neill said.

Blue crabs, black drum and sheephead all use Ranga clams (the species being dredged) as a food source, she said, noting that the three species are commercially harvested in the lake.

The organisms that live on the bottom of the lake and can be adversely affected by dredging “are very important to the lake’s ecology,” O’Neill said. “They are a part of the food chain and the higher vertebrates depend upon them as a food source. There are a number of fish species that feed on the bottom of the lake.”

“Dredging contributes to lakewide turbidity levels, and overall lakewide turbidity levels have adversely affected the grassbeds,” which “serve as spawning and nursery grounds for a variety of forfish and shellfish.”

“At one time, grassbeds occupied large areas along the lake’s southern shore,” O’Neill said. “The . . . extent of grassbeds decreased approximately 50 percent between 1973 and 1985.”

“The Lake Pontchartrain ecosystem is under stress,” she said.

Dredges use pumps to create hydraulic suction pulling up mud, shell and water, which are screened to remove the shells. The water and mud are discharged back into the lake.

Subsequent to DEQ denying the permits, the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries informed the dredgers their leases had been revoked, said Virginia Van Sickle, secretary of that department. The Department of Natural Resources also pulled the dredgers’ coastal use permits.

“There are appeal rights,” Franklin said, “but I have no idea what we are going to do or what the process is.”

The decision was a “big surprise,” he said, adding that 28 different studies have indicated shell dredging is environmentally sound.

Dredging had just recently resumed after being shut down by an injunction over validity of leases and the amount of royalties paid the state. The companies reached a settlement in that case, agreeing to pay the state at least a one-eighth royalty.

“This has been a long battle,” said Ian Lindsey of the Attorney General’s Office, who had fought the issuance of permits. “After years of shouting back and forth, the Department of Environmental Quality held a full hearing last fall and this is a significant victory for the people of Louisiana.