State task force to act on alternative dredging plan

By CARL REDMAN
Advocate staff writer

If the lower Mississippi River channel is to be dredged to a guaranteed depth of 55 feet, the dredging should be extended at least 10 miles further north than the limit currently being recommended by a special consulting team hired by the state.

At least, that’s the position one of Baton Rouge’s representatives on the Governor’s Task Force on Deep Draft Vessel Access to the Lower Mississippi River intends to take when the task force meets Friday morning to act on the recommendations made in a $600,000 study.

Don Ayres, a member of the Greater Baton Rouge Port Commission, said he plans to ask the task force to go a step further than simply endorsing the findings of a consulting team headed by the firm of Tippetts, Abbott, McCarthy and Stratton.

Ayres said Thursday he will ask the task force to recommend dredging a deeper channel 10 miles north of Burnside, which was the northern limit suggested in the TAMS study.

After nearly a year of studying more than 40 different ways to make lower Mississippi River facilities accessible to some of the larger ships now plying the world’s seas, the consultants have settled on three basic recommendations:

- The state should seek federal authorization for a 55-foot channel as far north as Mile 172 at Burnside.
- The state should move forward as rapidly as possible with implementation of a 45-foot channel to Mile 172.
- The state should encourage private development of topping off operations near the mouth of the river.

However, since Mile 172 is on the southern edge of the Port of Greater Baton Rouge’s jurisdiction, many fear the local port will suffer if the consultants’ recommendations are carried out.

While Ayres doesn’t feel there is sufficient economic justification to warrant pushing a deeper channel as far as Baton Rouge, he said he has received data from the task force staff that indicates a push to Mile 182 would be feasible.

Ayres said staff data showed it would cost an additional $3.9 million to relocate pipelines and cables in that 10-mile stretch.

Annual maintenance on the additional mileage would be only $330,000, he said.

Ayres said he asked for similar information on pushing the channel to Mile 189, but the pipeline relocation cost would be a whopping $20.5 million for those extra seven miles.

“Since the consultants did not do a projection of the negative effect to Baton Rouge, and since it’s all 10 to 20 years in the future, I felt we had to do something to protect the Port of Greater Baton Rouge’s position,” Ayres said. “...If we come a little further than Burnside and it looks like the port is losing business, we would have the opportunity to go down and purchase space along the deeper channel.”

Last week the task force accepted the TAMS study but stopped short of adopting any of the recommendations of the consultants. Instead, the task force agreed to give state agencies and local port authorities 10 days to make comments.

Task force executive director Joseph Cocchiara said Thursday afternoon his office had received only a handful of comments and none of them was overwhelmingly opposed to the project.

He said the South Louisiana Port Commission and the Port of New Orleans have both endorsed the consultants’ recommendations.

“The (U.S. Army) Corps of Engineers said they will not take a position, but they have indicated they will be at the meeting Friday to answer questions,” Cocchiara said. “The Division of Administration said that if federal participation is at least at the 50-50 level, then it looks good to them.”

In addition, the state Department of Natural Resources has commented that its main concern is that the necessary studies be done to assess the project’s potential impact on the environment, Cocchiara said.

In the 132-page final report, the TAMS group concluded there is more than enough economic justification for channel dredging as far as Burnside, but the benefits of pushing the project to Baton Rouge fell off dramatically and the costs nearly doubled.

The TAMS study concluded that the benefits of the project — such things as transportation savings by moving cargo in large ships, new jobs and additional tax revenues — would increase about 5 percent if the project were pushed to Baton Rouge.

However, the cost of dredging the additional 58 miles would nearly double the cost of the project, according to TAMS.

In current dollars, the TAMS study projected it would cost $129 million — $77 million in public funds — to dredge a 45-foot channel as far as Burnside, relocate gas lines and cables, and modify terminal facilities. A 55-foot channel to Burnside would cost $250 million, with $169 million of the cost coming from public sources.

Although they met in special session early this week, members of the Greater Baton Rouge Port Commission couldn’t agree on what stand to take on the TAMS recommendations.

Several members wanted the commission to go on record in favor of a deeper channel as far as Mile 230. However, others felt that a user fee to help pay for the project could get so high it would discourage shippers if the channel were pushed to Baton Rouge.