



US Army Corps
of Engineers
New York District

News Statement

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Clearing the Record on Borrow Pits

Recent news reports have indicated that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is actively preparing to dump heavily contaminated sediments containing Agent Orange dredged from New York Harbor into borrow pits in Jamaica Bay and the Lower Bay of New York Harbor.

The borrow pits are man-made holes excavated in the harbor bottom decades ago to acquire fill material to build projects including John F. Kennedy Airport and the New Jersey Turnpike.

The reports have created unfounded fear and concern among local residents that the government will be ruining beaches and contaminating local waters with toxic chemicals.

These reports are false. The Corps of Engineers has no plans to place any sediments into borrow pits off Coney Island and Staten Island.

This statement looks at the myths behind some of these commonly held beliefs, and counters with the facts.

Myth: The Corps of Engineers continues to dump contaminated material into the ocean, destroying fish, harming the environment and ruining area beaches.

Fact: The Corps of Engineers is managing the program to deepen and maintain harbor channels for port use by some of the largest ships in the world. One of the challenges of the program is to identify cost-effective, environmentally acceptable locations to place the millions of cubic yards of rock, sand, mud and clay that must be moved to deepen the channels and keep the harbor safe for navigation. To facilitate this, a variety of uses for the materials have been identified. These include capping historic dumping areas in the Atlantic Ocean, placement of rock at fishing reef sites, closing abandoned landfills in Elizabeth, Jersey City and Bayonne, New Jersey, and even utilizing material toward the remediation of acid-leaching strip mines in Pennsylvania. It is important to note that, counter to some claims, much of the material dredged from the harbor is

free of significant contamination, and is very appropriately used for addressing other environmental issues.

Myth: The Corps of Engineers has already dumped contaminated material in the borrow pits without telling the public.

Fact: No material has gone to any borrow pit anywhere in the harbor. The Corps has no plan to undertake any project using borrow pits in the Lower Bay. In fact, pits located directly off Coney Island (East Bank Pits) and Staten Island (for example, the CAC Pit) that have recently been identified by citizen activists as being designated for near-term disposal activity have been studied extensively, and are no longer being considered for any action but preservation in their existing state.

What the Corps is doing, in partnership with the study's sponsor, the State of New York, and in concert with a number of other federal, state and local agencies, is investigating the ecological "health" of certain borrow pits whose habitat values may have degraded because of the water depth, location, and poor water circulation in the area surrounding the depression. The investigation will determine conditions within and adjacent to the pits and serve as a basis for discussion among regional stakeholders on whether environmental restoration of a pit is appropriate or necessary as a part of a larger overall goal to improve the environmental quality of the harbor estuary. And while filling a particular man-made depression or hole with dredged material to a more natural depth could be an option to restore its value to the ecosystem, years of study including public participation and consensus building on any approach are necessary before any decision is made on whether to implement this option on a larger scale and what kind of material could be both suitable and safe. Indeed, such an action would require extensive evaluation and design and the regulatory approval of several state agencies before any material could be placed, assuming the State of New York or some other non-federal agency was prepared to be a cost-sharing sponsor for such an action.

Myth: The Corps of Engineers isn't doing anything to stop contamination at the source.

Fact: Contamination of harbor sediments due to present and past pollution must be addressed and resolved. The Dredged Material Management Plan identified reducing contaminants as a major goal in implementing its recommendations, and the Army Corps of Engineers along with the States of New York and New Jersey have funded millions of dollars in the last several years in an effort to identify and ultimately eliminate the sources of sediment contamination. Given that many contaminants (including but not limited to PCB's and dioxins) exist within the harbor as a result of decades of pollution, the goal will not be achieved overnight, but with the dedicated commitment of all the involved agencies, private organizations and an informed public.

Myth: The Corps of Engineers is only concerned about making the harbor deeper for businesses, not about the people who live in the area.

Fact: The public is rightfully concerned that dredged materials, particularly those with elevated levels of contaminants, are safely and effectively managed. While the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is the agency charged with developing and maintaining navigation channels in the port to ensure the economic viability of the region and its millions of consumers, the health and safety of the public and environment is the Corps' highest concern. Given the public's concerns regarding how dredged material is managed in the region, the Corps is making every effort to ensure that honest and accurate information is provided in a timely manner and its elected officials so that sound, rational decisions can be made that best advance the public interest.

-- 27 Jun 01 --