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Joint news release from the Dredged Material Management Program, consisting of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Washington departments of Ecology and Natural Resources

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Dioxins found in Budd Inlet sediments - agencies join together to improve conditions

OLYMPIA - State and federal agencies have found dioxins in sediment samples taken from areas slated for maintenance dredging in South Sound's Budd Inlet.

The dredging seeks to improve safety in the navigation channel and access conditions.

"We are concerned about the dioxin findings in Budd Inlet," said Jay Manning, director of the state Department of Ecology (Ecology). "Budd Inlet's health is an indicator of an already ailing Puget Sound."

This finding is reported in a "suitability determination" just issued by the multi-agency Dredged Material Management Program (DMMP). The program addresses the suitability of sediments proposed to be dredged from the Olympia Harbor Navigation Channel and Port of Olympia berthing area for disposal at the nearest unconfined open-water disposal site off Anderson-Ketron Island. The site is managed by the state Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

The DMMP is comprised of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (lead agency), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and the Washington state departments of Ecology and Natural Resources. The program ensures that dredged material is evaluated thoroughly so judgments may be made about appropriate disposal alternatives to protect environmental resources and public health.

The dioxin finding came about after the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Port of Olympia tested Budd Inlet sediments for contamination in areas planned for dredging.

The proposed maintenance dredging project has been in the planning process for several years. The purpose of the project is to restore the deep navigation channel to its authorized depth and includes a minor widening of the turning basin. The Port of Olympia also plans to conduct maintenance dredging in the berthing areas to maintain their permitted depths. The last maintenance dredging in Budd Inlet occurred in the 1970s.

Early this year, the DMMP agencies required this supplemental testing for dioxins in the proposed dredging areas, partly at the recommendation of citizens, and partly due to past industrial practices on Budd Inlet shorelines. Sediments slated for dredging are typically not tested for dioxins.

Based on the test results, the DMMP agencies have determined that a little less than half of the material slated for dredging is suitable for open-water disposal at the Anderson-Ketron Island site.

Only those sediments that are at or below existing Anderson-Ketron Island dioxin background levels will be approved for open-water disposal. The DMMP determination was made to protect a nearby crab fishery.

The DMMP also found that dioxin levels in a little more than half the material to be dredged are high enough that they need to be disposed on land or in a confined, aquatic disposal site. Such practices are more costly than unconfined open-water sediment disposal.

Dioxins are a concern because they are toxic contaminants that last a long time in the environment and can build-up in aquatic organisms, becoming more concentrated as they move through the food chain. Thurston County Health Department has issued a shellfish advisory for Budd Inlet. The advisory recommends that shellfish harvested from the south end of Budd Inlet near Swantown Marina may not be eaten due to chemical contamination (including dioxin) and for all of south Budd Inlet due to bacteriological contamination. The state Department of Health continues to recommend that people eat fish as part of a healthy diet and to choose fish that are known to be low in contaminants.

Ecology and the DMMP will work with the Port of Olympia to design a dredging plan that accomplishes both priority dredging for navigation safety and access and removes significant quantities of dioxins from the marine environment. This will provide appropriate depths for safe navigation while ensuring material is removed that may be subject to erosion/re-suspension as vessels transit the channel and berthing areas.

Ecology Director Manning said, "The presence of dioxin at these concentrations has prompted us to view this project as a sediment cleanup project as much as a navigational dredging project. Removing those sediments with higher concentrations of dioxin from Budd Inlet will improve the quality of the marine environment. We will work with the Port to ensure that the project moves forward in a timely manner to achieve the dual benefits of environmental and navigation improvements."

According to Hiram Arden, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers navigation project manager, "The Corps of Engineers continues to work with the Port and state and federal agencies to determine the best course of action. The Corps will provide full public process to involve the people as the maintenance dredging proposal is put out for review."

Fran McNair, DNR's aquatic lands steward said, "As steward of state-owned aquatic lands, we support the Port of Olympia's role providing economic development through navigation and commerce. But by the same token as land steward, with proprietary responsibilities for these lands, cleanup of Puget Sound is critical. We support and are actively involved in Governor Gregoire's goal for cleanup of Puget Sound by 2020. The removal of contaminated sediments, such as these dioxins, moves us one step closer to that goal. We support this collaborative effort that is taking us one step closer to a healthier aquatic ecosystem here."

Port of Olympia Commissioner Bob Van Schoorl said, "This maintenance dredging project is critical to maintaining existing operations at the Port's marine terminal. It is vital to our community and this region. We are encouraged by the support of the regulatory agencies for moving this project forward in a safe and efficient manner."

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Suitability Determination on-line:

<http://www.nws.usace.army.mil/PublicMenu/Menu.cfm?sitename=DMMO&pagename=SDM%20BY%20Y>

More information about dioxin: <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/~lrd/dioxinqa.html>