

INTEGRATING DREDGING PROJECTS INTO A BROADER MANAGEMENT CONTEXT IN NEW ENGLAND

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Keywords: management, dredging team, stakeholder, coordination, regulations

Development of dredging projects to maintain waterways requires coordination of numerous federal and state agencies. Federal agencies include the USACE, US EPA, NMFS, USFWS; state agencies typically include those with responsibilities for coastal zone, environmental, and fisheries management depending on the structure of each state. Each agency has a distinct regulatory responsibility and interest to protect economic and natural resources. While there is overlap in these interests, the most common approach is to view potential dredging projects through the distinct lens of each agency's responsibilities. In the past, this has led to regulatory gridlock, litigation and a backlog of projects stuck in limbo.

The process to evaluate and coordinate dredging projects among agencies, interest groups, and the public has evolved over the last decade from one that was largely a reactionary approach (proponents "served", opponents "volleyed") to one that is more proactive and team oriented. In New England, this evolution was fostered by the creation of two interagency bodies in the mid-1990s consisting of a mid-level managers (MLM) group and a technical staff work group. The MLM group consists of first and second level supervisors from the four principle, reviewing Federal agencies with the ability to set agency policy. They provide guidance and work tasks to the technical group for investigation, discussion, and development of recommendations. The technical work group consists primarily of federal and state agency staff and some non-government representatives with both technical and regulatory expertise. Both of these groups are largely focused on bringing resolution to broader issues in a forum that is separated from discussions of individual projects. This has enabled these groups to tackle general issues without the "baggage" that sometimes is wrapped around strongly held positions on individual projects.

The concept of greater stakeholder coordination on dredging projects developed at the national level in parallel with the New England efforts with the formation of the National Dredging Team in 1995. As the national effort was implemented, the two New England groups formed the nucleus for the structure of the New England Regional Dredging Team (NERDT). The entire coordination network now includes four State Dredging Teams and one Long Island Sound Regional Dredging Team. These teams include a broader, more diverse representation of local groups, state agencies, and private interests than the NERDT. There are also working groups established around individual dredging projects, especially those involving larger harbors.

All of these forums have provided a less confrontational method to discuss issues and understand differing perspectives than the prior “serve and volley” approach. As a result, there is broader concurrence than in the past on finalized project designs and minimal “news worthy” confrontations. A key element of the success is the continuity of participation and experience represented on the teams. The forums are also being used to address topics such as the application of seasonal restrictions to protect fishery resources, to identify beneficial use opportunities for sediments, and to consider regional sediment/watershed management factors.

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