

Take Action: Protect the Lower Cape Fear River

The Wilmington Port Expansion poses many threats to the environment of the Lower Cape Fear region, which is rife with wildlife and natural resources, boasting spectacular barrier islands, tidal creeks, and salt marshes.

The proposed plan would deepen the channel from 44 to 49 feet at the entrance and from 42 to 47 feet at the Port, widen some parts of the channel by 100-300 feet, and extend the entrance further offshore. The project cost will exceed \$1.3 *billion* dollars and require \$14 million per year in maintenance work.

Deepening and widening the Federal ship channel will:

- **Destroy more than 1,000 acres of vital wetlands** that protect coastal communities from floods and provide essential fish and bird habitat.
- **Negatively impact fish and wildlife habitats**, including threatened and endangered species, nesting birds, and marine mammals.
- **Expose wildlife and people to dangerous PFAS (“forever chemicals”)** through dredging and disposal of contaminated sediment.
- **Degrade water and air quality**, further threatening the health of nearby communities and ecosystems.
- **Increase flooding** as more storm surge can travel up the river during hurricanes and other extreme weather events.
- **Allow more saltwater to intrude further upriver**, changing salinity levels and killing trees in sensitive tidal forests.
- **Accelerate shoreline and wetland erosion** along the river and nearby oceanfront beaches. Long-term erosion on Bald Head and Oak Islands has already been linked to previous channel modifications; deepening, widening, “softening” river bends, and extending the channel seaward would likely worsen wave energy and sediment disruption across the region.
- **Increase vessel tonnage**, leading to more wakes that erode shorelines and increase the risk of vessel strikes on turtles, fish, and marine mammals.
- **Degrade fishery and bird habitats** associated with estuarine islands, shoals, and mudflats that provide essential resting and foraging areas for migratory and nesting birds.
- **Reduce dissolved oxygen levels** and alter the river’s salinity balance, putting additional stress on aquatic life and estuarine ecosystems.

The Corps has not demonstrated a compelling need for this project:

- The harbor already accommodates the large ships this project is designed for.
- The only economic savings identified in the Draft EIS benefit private shipping companies, not the NC Ports Authority, coastal economies, or the people of North Carolina.

- The Corps has failed to fully evaluate the project's long-term costs, including the need for more frequent maintenance dredging and flood mitigation.

The Corps' analysis underestimates climate risks:

- The Draft EIS downplays the impacts of sea level rise and compound flooding in the Wilmington area.
- It fails to adequately account for how deepening the harbor will amplify storm surge and flooding, increasing risks to homes, businesses, and critical infrastructure.

Natural attributes of the Cape Fear River that need protection include:

- Spectacular barrier islands, tidal creeks, and marsh ecosystems teeming with wildlife. These habitats support North Carolina's vital coastal fisheries - red drum, mackerel, cobia, bluefish, flounder, shrimp, and over fifty snapper-grouper species.
- Primary nursery areas where young fish and crustaceans develop, as well as critical habitat for the federally endangered Atlantic sturgeon, which can live up to sixty years and spawn in the river.
- Important nesting and foraging grounds for sea turtles at Caswell Beach, Bald Head Island, and within the river's sandy shorelines and marshes, home to the state-listed diamondback terrapin.
- Over 330 bird species rely on this region throughout the year, including bald eagles and brown pelicans. More than 25% of North Carolina's coastal waterbirds nest in the Lower Cape Fear River region.

Bottom line:

The proposed Wilmington Harbor expansion would cause irreversible harm to the Cape Fear River, its wildlife, and surrounding communities, all without a proven public need.

The Army Corps of Engineers must hear from North Carolinians: **protect, don't deepen, the Cape Fear River**. Submit your public comment by November 3.

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