

2/25/2026

To:

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
North Carolina State Ports Authority
North Carolina Congressional Delegation
Governor of North Carolina
North Carolina General Assembly
North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality
Brunswick County Legislative Delegation

Re: Transmittal of Joint Regional Statement – Wilmington Harbor 403 Project

Dear Colleagues:

On behalf of the municipalities and cultural resources of the Lower Cape Fear region, we respectfully submit the attached Joint Regional Statement regarding the proposed Wilmington Harbor 403 Deepening Project.

We acknowledge and appreciate the recent decision by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the North Carolina State Ports Authority to pause advancement of the project. That pause is both prudent and necessary. It provides an opportunity to address significant economic and environmental questions that must be resolved before additional federal or state commitments are contemplated.

As outlined in the attached statement, we strongly urge that—prior to any advancement to the Final Environmental Impact phase—an updated Economic Assessment be conducted reflecting current container volumes, carrier realignments, benefit-to-cost thresholds, and realistic cost projections. Given the narrow margin reflected in the existing analysis, reliance on outdated data would be fiscally irresponsible and inconsistent with sound public stewardship.

The Lower Cape Fear functions as a single, interconnected coastal system. Decisions affecting the channel directly affect twenty-eight miles of river shoreline, critical habitat, municipal infrastructure, and long-term financial exposure for local governments and taxpayers. A project of this magnitude must be justified by transparent, current economic data and accompanied by a credible, fully defined environmental safeguard framework.

Our communities support responsible maritime infrastructure that strengthens North Carolina's economy. However, we cannot support advancement of this project absent clear economic validation and a demonstrated commitment to long-term environmental and fiscal resilience.

Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully on behalf of the following Lower Cape Fear municipalities and cultural resources,

Town of Belville – Mayor Chuck Bost
Village of Bald Head Island – Mayor Peter Quinn
Town of Caswell Beach – Mayor George Kassler
Town of Kure Beach – Mayor Allen Oliver
Town of Navassa – Mayor Rossetta Terry

Town of Oak Island – Mayor Chris Brown
Orton Plantation – Property Manager Dillon Epp
Town of Saint James – Mayor Jean Toner
Town of Shallotte – Mayor Art Dornfeld
City of Southport – Mayor Joe Pat Hatem

Joint Regional Statement

Wilmington Harbor 403 Project

North Carolina Congressional Delegation

Governor, North Carolina

North Carolina General Assembly

US Army Corps of Engineers

North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality

North Carolina State Ports Authority

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As municipalities and stewards of taxpayer, cultural and environmental resources in the Lower Cape Fear region, we have come together to express our shared concerns regarding the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' recently released Draft Environmental Impact Statement ("DEIS"), dated September 12, 2025, for the proposal to deepen and widen the Cape Fear River channel from the ocean to the Wilmington Harbor (the "Wilmington Harbor Project").

While each of our communities may experience different localized impacts, we are united in calling upon the Corps, the Ports Authority (as Project Sponsor), and the State of North Carolina to ensure that prior to advancing the deepening project to the Final Environmental Impact phase, **an updated Economic Assessment be conducted reflecting 2025 volumes and ocean carrier profiles for the Port of Wilmington, focusing on container activity.**

Our concerns regarding the feasibility of this project must be addressed before additional studies attempt to identify an adaptive management plan and ongoing monitoring. We believe the impacts of this proposed project cannot adequately or successfully be mitigated given existing challenges in the Cape Fear River and surrounding communities.

The specific economic factors raising red flags include:

- The extremely slim margin of feasibility with a Benefit to Cost Ratio (BCR) of 1.3;
- The Office of Management and Budget BCR threshold of 2.5 to qualify for federal funding;
- Ocean Carrier Services highlighted in the Economic Assessment as justification for the deepening stopped calling Wilmington in May 2025;
- Ocean Carrier Alliances have realigned and are inaccurate in the Corps study; and
- The Operations & Maintenance dollars used in the annual cost equation seem low given the \$18 Million contract just awarded for maintenance dredging.

We are aware that the Corps will be required to update the BCR during the Pre-Construction Engineering and Design phase (when other costs excluded from this current cost estimate are included such as real estate acquisition, mitigation and ongoing monitoring) but the current state of play with escalating project costs and lower volumes at the NC Ports Authority, demand this should be updated now. It is minimal effort to do so and is the responsible path for the Corps of Engineers.

A 47-Foot Project is a last generation deepening project as surrounding Top 10 container ports are either deeper or have already achieved this proposed depth; and are currently seeking further deepening.

We must ask ourselves, Is North Carolina prepared to pay the entire cost of the project if federal dollars don't materialize?

Our citizens deserve the ability to evaluate this project on clear and accurate economic data. It is premature to attempt to address the tremendously negative environmental impacts of deepening to 47-Feet without confirmation the project has a positive benefit to cost ratio that merits federal funding.

Any future studies, **should they be warranted after a thorough, timely economic assessment**, must address a comprehensive, long-term, and fully funded Adaptive Management and Monitoring plan.

The DEIS not only lacks accurate economic data, it also fails to identify detrimental impacts to shorelines along the twenty-eight miles of the Cape Fear River, and proposes only two mitigation measures with the approximate cost of \$60 million, with no monitoring plan proposed beyond evaluating the effectiveness of these two limited actions.

By comparison, when the Savannah Harbor was deepened, that project cost approximately \$900 million, of which \$500 million was dedicated specifically to mitigation and ten years of post-construction monitoring. The Wilmington Harbor DEIS contains no comparable commitments.

We emphasize that the Lower Cape Fear functions as a single coastal system, and the strength of our shared regional economy depends on the health of our surrounding environment. What happens to the channel impacts every community.

We support responsible maritime infrastructure that strengthens our state's economy. But we cannot accept a project that lacks accurate economic data to determine feasibility and ignores the long-term financial commitment to provide environmental safeguards necessary to protect our shorelines, habitats, riverfronts, infrastructure, and citizens.

Through this Joint Regional Statement, we affirm our unified commitment to stewardship, resilience, and the responsible management of the Lower Cape Fear and our taxpayer resources—today and for generations to come.

**Town of Belville – Mayor Chuck Bost
Village of Bald Head Island – Mayor Peter Quinn
Town of Caswell Beach – Mayor George Kassler
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