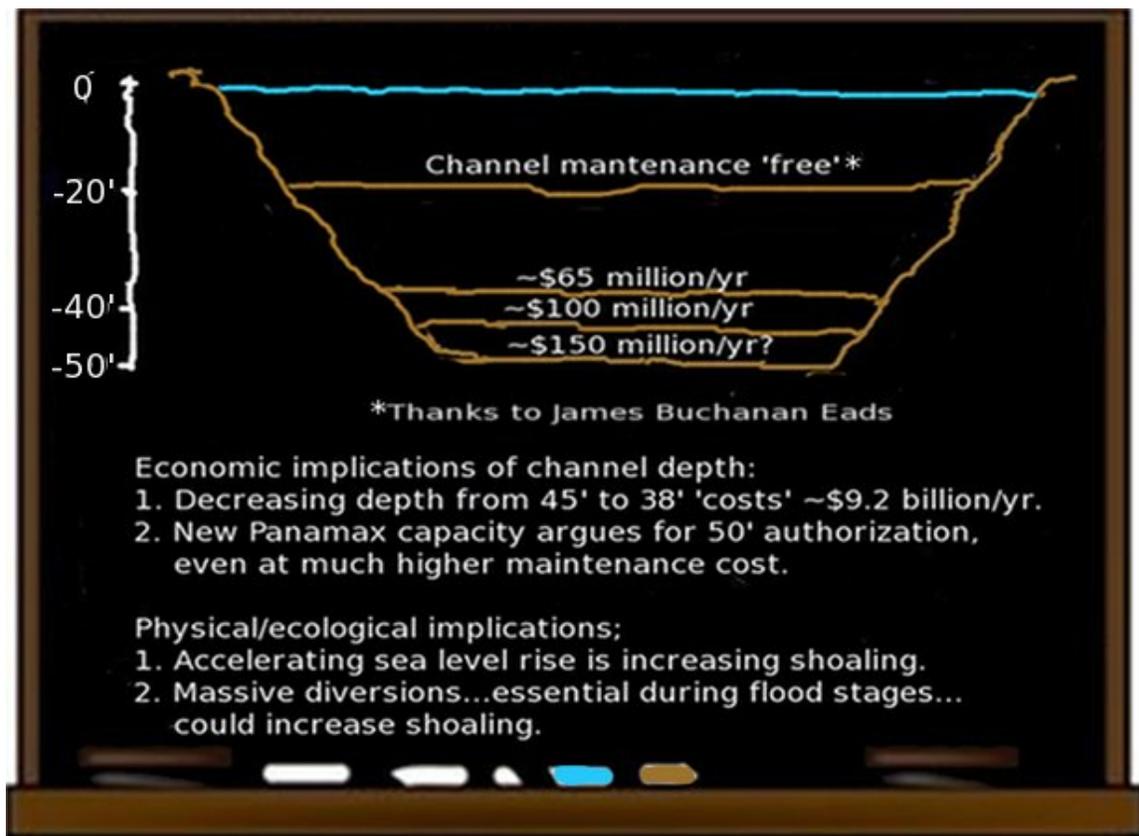


Why are the interrelated issues of channel dredging, river diversions and the Panama Canal expansion not being integrated?



These issues could in theory be rectified with a new slackwater navigation channel for the lower river. Why isn't such a win-win solution mentioned in the 2012 Louisiana Coastal Mater Plan?

By Len Bahr, Ph.D.*

<http://lacoastpost.com/blog/?p=39236>

The Mississippi Valley Division of the U.S. Army corps of Engineers spends more money to maintain the channel between Baton Rouge and the Gulf of Mexico than for any comparable reach in the country. This situation is being exacerbated by shrinking budget allocations and rising dredging needs caused by increasing shoaling.

On November 9 , 2011 The Advocate published an [article](#) by Amy Wold on the growing financial struggle over the rising cost to maintain a navigation channel from Baton Rouge to the Gulf that is sufficiently deep and wide to support a huge portion of American maritime commerce.

Almost a year before, Cameron McWhirter wrote an [article](#) on this subject for the *Wall Street Journal* on December 14, 2010...just before the freshman class of fiscal hawks had been sworn into Congress and prior to the Great Flood of 2011. Here are some quotes:

Concerns about annual funding for the dredging of the lower Mississippi come as the Corps budget faces likely cuts. It also comes as other ports, like Savannah, Charleston and Miami, pressure Congress to fund new projects to deepen their harbors in anticipation of an expansion of the Panama Canal by 2015, which will bring much larger ships to the eastern U.S.

The Corps normally guarantees to dredge to a depth of 45 feet in most parts of the Mississippi River and a width of 500 to 750 feet for the lower river's ports and channels. But this year, "we haven't guaranteed anything," (Corps' spokesman) Mr. Jones said.

The fiscal 2011 budget calls for the Corps to receive \$63 million for Lower Mississippi dredging, \$6.3 more than it received in fiscal 2010. But actual costs of dredging total about \$85 million annually on average, and topped \$110 million in fiscal 2010, according to the Corps.

The river system that feeds to the mouth of the Mississippi carries barges loaded with imported petrochemical products, construction material and other goods as well as exports such as grain, corn, soybean and coal. More than 60% of all agricultural products exported from the U.S. are shipped through the mouth of the Mississippi.



A whole lotta stuff (photo from npr.org)

With respect to the highlighted phrase, on January 5 Greg Allen [reported](#) on NPR's *All Things Considered* that the predictable race is on for eastern port cities to deepen their navigation channels to 50 feet in order to accommodate the monster [New Panamax](#) vessels that will soon be traveling through the expanded Panama Canal. The cities listed included Miami, Savannah, Charleston, Baltimore, New York...and New Orleans.

On January 11 Richard Thompson with *The Times-Picayune* [described](#) the results of a brand new study by Tim Ryan, former Chancellor of UNO, of serious economic consequences of not maintaining the

authorized depth of the river. Ryan's study, also [described](#) by Cain Burdeau with the *Associated Press*, was commissioned by a navigation user group called the [Big River Coalition](#).

Curiously enough, neither Wold, nor Thompson nor Burdeau mentioned three interrelated and seriously complicating factors: (1) the Panama Canal expansion; (2) ongoing shoaling of the lower river from sea level rise;** or (3) the fundamental need to totally replumb the lower river to allow the episodic diversion of about one third of the spring river flow into [America's Delta](#) to rebuild landscape.

This exemplifies the fact that the discussion of authorizing the river for deeper draft is taking place, as usual, in a vacuum, separate and apart from plans for coastal restoration. A word search of the just released *2012 Louisiana Coastal [Master Plan](#)* confirmed my expectation that the Panama Canal expansion is not mentioned.

In terms of (1) on January 5 Greg Allen [reported](#) on NPR's *All Things Considered* that the predictable race is on for eastern port cities to deepen their navigation channels to 50 feet in order to accommodate the deep draft monster vessels that will soon be traveling through the expanded Panama Canal in 2014. The cities listed included Miami, Savannah, Charleston, Baltimore, New York...and New Orleans.

While researching this post I stumbled onto a radical proposal by former Corps of Engineers staffer Harley Winer, Ph.D., that would dramatically reduce the dredging budget for the lower Mississippi River by increasing the proportion of water and sediment that flows into the Atchafalaya at the Old River Control Structure. This concept was [published](#) in 2011 in the *Journal of Coastal Research*. Here's the abstract: *An environmentally sound concept of maximizing the benefits of the Mississippi River sediment load is proposed by allowing the river to naturally change its course to the Atchafalaya while maintaining navigation and flood control in the present channel of the Mississippi. A sediment lean, minimum necessary flow is determined for the lower Mississippi River to insure navigation and freshwater needs. Some of the political and economic ramifications are anticipated and discussed. The need for a new engineering study is addressed. Finding an effective way to utilize the sediment load of the Mississippi River is essential if the coastal wetland ecology of southern Louisiana is to survive and flourish. Allowing the river to naturally change its course is ultimately the only viable option. The shortcomings of other means of using the river sediment load are discussed.*

*Founding Editor leonardbahr@gmx.com

**The corps erroneously blames this shoaling on the West Bay diversion project.