

# The Nehalem Dredging Saga



## Wheeler Marina

Wheeler Marina at a fairly low tide in 2010 (the situation is still the same, perhaps a bit worse).



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## The Nehalem Dredging Saga Op-Ed By Cameron La Follette and Ralph Thomas | 1 comment

The Nehalem River is the lifeblood of the little towns of Wheeler and Nehalem. So a distressing series of missteps that led to a dredging fiasco in the river is having far-reaching consequences.

The Port of Nehalem applied to the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Oregon Dept. of State Lands in November 2011 for required permits to dredge the Wheeler waterfront. This project was identified as the fourth highest county priority by the Tillamook County Commissioners because impinging mudflats means that Wheeler has continuously had to extend its docks further into the Nehalem River, thus encroaching on the navigation channel. The Wheeler project was small, only about 300 cubic yards.

The Port opened discussions with the City of Wheeler and Wheeler Marina for project funding. The Port wanted both to pay for the dredging via an open-ended funding agreement. Both refused. As a result, budget talks about project funding never developed to the point of city council decision-making.

The Port changed its application to DSL and the Corps in December 2011; it still included the Wheeler Marina dredging, but also dredging at Deer Island Slough opposite the City of Nehalem waterfront. Now the Port proposed to dredge 5,000 cubic yards from the river. That's about 500 dump truck loads of sediment. Deer Island Slough is not a navigable channel, and the Nehalem part of the project was projected to cost upwards of \$350,000 and benefit mainly those with docks along the Slough. The application specified that only those willing to "participate in the cost of the project" would be dredged: Port of Nehalem, City of Nehalem and Wheeler Marina.

Then the Port, through an unsigned letter in April 2012, probably by the Port's agent Bill Campbell, quietly notified the agencies that it was dropping Wheeler from the dredging project because "the cost to continue was deemed to expensive and provided no realistic cost-benefit ratio that would endure under present operational and cost-sharing parameters." Neither City of Wheeler nor Wheeler Marina were notified of this decision. The dredging proceeded in Deer Island Slough once permits were acquired.

Wheeler residents and city officials alike were shocked in mid-January to see a mound of dredge spoils rearing up in the middle of the river just above Nehalem Bridge. Investigation discovered that the DSL permit allowed the Port to use "in-flow dispersal" of the dredge spoils – meaning that they would just disperse in the river current, flowing downstream to Wheeler and on into Nehalem Bay, where they would settle out. However, the dredge spoils upon examination turned out not to be "fine sediments" but heavier, gravelly materials that would clearly not disperse in the hoped-for manner.

How did this happen? Most of the responsibility goes to the Corps of Engineers as leader of the Portland Sediment Evaluation Team (PSET). They underestimated the extent of gravel and cobbles, and instead recommended in-water disposal as if the dredge spoils were fine sediments. DSL is responsible for additional efforts to disperse the dredge island, ignoring the effect this would have on downstream communities, especially Wheeler. Neither considered where the spoils would ultimately settle. The Oregon Dept. of Fish and Wildlife (ODFW), though they reviewed the dredging application, did not propose any conditions that would have effectively protected the Nehalem River.

Then there is the financial angle. Further investigation showed that the Port told the City of Nehalem that the Deer Island Slough part of the project would be funded entirely with Port monies. Dale Stockton, who is Port of Nehalem Commission President and Nehalem City Council President, led the discussion. Nehalem initially hoped for a State

Marine Board grant to aid in the City's cost for the dredging, but once the Marine Board notified the City there were unlikely to be funds, the Port assured the City that the Port would bear the cost. City of Nehalem Minutes twice reiterates this assertion by Dale Stockton, speaking for the Port: in November 2012 and December 2012. Yet back in 2011, the Port's application specified that the City of Nehalem would help pay for the dredging.

So Wheeler's urgently-needed dredging was never done, and there is a dredge island in the Nehalem River that has ruined a fine fishing spot. Most perplexing is the preferential treatment the City of Nehalem received at the Port's hands, while Wheeler was dropped from the project. Why?

The dredge island can no longer be seen, but it is still there. The initial outcry prompted DSL and the Port of Nehalem to flatten the pile. As of March 12, ODFW reported that the dredge pile is 30-40 yards in diameter, rising from a 20-foot depth to an eight-foot depth. It has not dispersed. Continued pressure from DSL to the Port of Nehalem to disperse the pile is worrying to Wheeler residents, who fear the dredge spoils will simply settle downstream a little ways and add to the sediment already clogging Wheeler's waterfront.

The aftermath of this fiasco continues. The project's DSL permit will remain open and active to mid-November. The high cost of permitting is beyond the means of small cities and waterfront businesses, as is clear from figures cited in this article. The Port of Nehalem should therefore restore the dredging of Wheeler's waterfront that was originally the centerpiece of the Port's application, and complete it sometime during the fall in-water work window. This would be much more cost effective for both the agencies and for Wheeler, which would otherwise have to pay \$60,000 or more for a new application, as well as wait at least a year for the agency approvals. Wheeler residents are also requesting DSL to require that the dredge spoils be removed from the river and taken to an appropriate upland location. This should have been the original outcome.

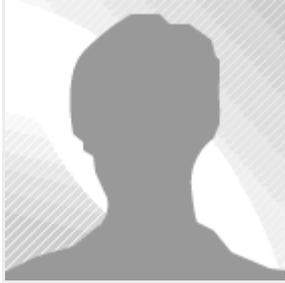
This debacle certainly raises more questions than answers (so far) about cronyism at the Port of Nehalem. It should prompt scrutiny of the Port's mission, financial management and preferential treatment of Nehalem over Wheeler.

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## 1 comment:

- **patootie posted at 4:07 pm on Tue, Apr 9, 2013.**



Posts: 34

Nehalem has historically dredged the Deer Island slough to allow tourists to use the restroom facilities, etc. The City of Wheeler dock does not have the same issues as the marina. From what I read above, it looks to me like "no money, no dredgey". I feel the burden is on the City of Wheeler/ Marina to make sure they get on the "list" so that they don't get left out.