

Suwannee Dredge: McGriff Pass and the Great Suwannee Reef Update

On August 30, 2007, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection issued an Intent to Issue Environmental Resource Permit and Consent to Use Sovereignty Submerged Lands for the dredge of the McGriff Pass in the Suwannee River Estuary. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has partnered with the Suwannee River Water Management District for this project. The dredged channel will be 50 feet wide, 7 feet deep and will cover 2.5 miles from the McGriff Pass to the edge of the Great Suwannee Reef.

This dredge project has a long history. The original project was authorized in 1880 and the dredge was planned to deepen and widen the Suwannee all the way to Ellaville (139 miles). In 1977 the majority of the dredge project was "de-authorized." Until 1999, the federally designated entrance channels for Suwannee River were Alligator Pass and East Pass. Alligator Pass, generally accepted to be the most natural channel from the river, has environmental concerns because of manatee activity in the area. In 1985, an attempt was made to permit the dredging of Alligator Pass, but it failed due to continued environmental concerns. The Water Resource Development Act of 1999 changed the Federal channel designation for the Suwannee River to include Wadley Pass (aka McGriff Pass).

Friends of the Great Suwannee Reef, Suwannee Audubon, Suwannee St. Johns Sierra Group, Save Our Suwannee and others have opposed this project for some time now. The project has changed in scope and locations were changed for the deposition of the spoil. The Governor and his cabinet approved the project in 2003. If this project goes forward, there will be many more power boats and marinas on the lower river. This project will also significantly change the salinity balance in the estuary. The deeper channel will allow more fresh water flow from McGriff Pass. With less fresh water in Alligator and East Passes, the salt water will intrude. This in turn will alter the vegetative communities in the riverine swamps and wetlands.

The Suwannee Estuary is one of the few truly wild places left on Florida's Coasts. With the exception of the Town of Suwannee and a few small in-holdings, the last 20 miles of the Suwannee River and the estuary are held in the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge. These lands cover over 53,000 acres on both sides of the river. The river and lands in this area are populated with manatees, gulf sturgeon, salt marsh voles, eastern indigo snakes, gopher tortoise, bald eagles, wood stork and swallow tailed kites. The Refuge's undisturbed coastal salt marshes, tidal creeks, and tidal flats are some of the most productive ecosystems in the world. These areas provide important foraging habitat for thousands of shorebirds and diving ducks while also serving as a valuable nursery for fish, shrimp, shellfish and juvenile sea turtles.

At this time, there is no working plan to oppose the DEP permit. However, we are asking anyone who opposes this project to request information from our U.S. Senators and Representative to find out how it will be paid for. There has already been \$2.7 million spent to do the engineering and land acquisition for the spoil site. There will need to be two more appropriations to complete the project. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has said they will "move money around" to pay for building the spoil site. They plan to begin in October 2008. Even more will be required for the actual dredge. A pipeline to and from the spoil site will have to be built and maintained. **Congressman Allen Boyd** said that he will work on an appropriation for this portion of the project to begin in October 2009. He is the sponsor for this project.

The town of Suwannee is trying to find funding for a new drinking water treatment plant. At this time, their public water supply is not safe to drink. The new water plant will cost over \$2 million, but at this time is not funded.

If you have questions about how the dredge will be funded or what other projects might suffer in order to push this destruction of the natural balance in the Suwannee Reef and Estuary you can write to:

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