



Public Affairs Office

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Wilmington, NC—The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Wilmington District, today issued a provisional permit to New Hanover County for its proposed project to relocate Mason Inlet. The county-sponsored project would include constructing a sediment basin and excavating Mason Creek, with any material suitable for beach nourishment to be placed on the south end of Figure Eight Island. Suitable material from maintenance dredging over the 30-year period specified in the permit would go to either Figure eight Island or Wrightsville Beach.

Keith Harris, Chief of the Wilmington Regulatory Office, said: "We have worked closely with the Federal and state resource agencies since April 1996, evaluating the relocation of Mason Inlet's impacts on important natural resources." The original applicant, the Shell Island Beach Homeowners Association, gave way in early 1999 to New Hanover County, when the county decided to sponsor the project.

"Issuing a provisional permit is a further step, but by no means the conclusion of the process," Harris said. What comes next? The North Carolina Division of Coastal Management (CAMA), using the Wilmington District's Environmental Assessment, will review the project compliance with the North Carolina Environmental Policy Act. After the review—about November 17th—CAMA will make a Coastal Zone Management consistency determination. If CAMA concurs with the project and issues a Coastal Area Management Act Permit, Wilmington District will finalize its permit, including any appropriate conditions added by the state.

"Those who have followed the progress of this permit action know that it has required extensive discussions and a very close examination of variables," Harris said. The project area contains important habitat for shorebirds and water birds and critical habitat for the piping plover. The area also includes essential fisheries habitat.

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“Resource agencies requested inclusion of a number of conditions that have been attached to the permit,” Harris said. The Clean Water Act and the National Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act require that the Corps includes conditions requested by the state and Federal resource agencies to protect fish and wildlife resources. These include:

- At the request of the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), permit condition limits construction work to the period November 15 to March 30 in order to protect fisheries.
- The applicant must also comply with the USFWS Biological Opinion, which lists 27 *conservation measures*, 19 *reasonable and prudent measures*, and 26 *terms and conditions* to protect piping plovers, manatees, sea beach amaranth, and sea turtles.
- To mitigate for impacts on shorebirds and water birds, the permit requires a management plan for project uplands, including intertidal shoals and inlet shoulders. Agencies who requested these mitigations must review the plan and receive annual reports on its effectiveness. These include the North Carolina Wildlife Resource Commission, the North Carolina Division of Marine Fisheries, and the USFWS. For example, this aspect of mitigation affects the areas currently being used as a dog exercise area.
- To mitigate for impacts on aquatic resources, the permit requires that the applicant provide docking and loading facilities to aid the NC Division of Marine Fisheries with its oyster seeding program, and that the applicant construct a marsh and tidal creek at an existing AIWW disposal area.
- A further set of conditions requested by resource agencies require the permit holder to monitor Mason Creek, Banks Channel, and the beach nourishment areas. Annual reports of these data will document project impacts and the mitigations’ effectiveness. These data will be analyzed at each maintenance event to insure that project impacts, including cumulative effects, are reasonable, that the mitigation is appropriate, and that the maintenance cycles are as widely spaced as practicable.
- Also, under the permit, the Corps requires New Hanover County to accept responsibility for future maintenance requirements at the intersection of Mason Creek and the AIWW, which may occur as a result of the dredging of Mason Creek.
- The County also agreed to purchase a parcel of property on Masonboro Island for protection of shorebirds, particularly the piping plover. This agreement is not a portion of the permit, and is simply an agreement between the county and the USFWS.