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FINAL RESTING SPOTS FOR DREDGING SPOILS MIRED IN CONTROVERSY, THEN AND NOW

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Terry Miller winces when he thinks of Channel Island in the Saginaw Bay.

The confined disposal facility was built out of river dredgings in the 1970s by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Miller, chairman of a local environmental group called the Lone Tree Council, recalls studies done in the 1980s that found high rates of twisted beaks, other deformities and deaths in birds nesting on the island.

He fears the Corps has made another mistake on the Saginaw-Bay county line, where Saginaw County Public Works commissioner Jim Koski has helped construct a new confined disposal facility on a farm field along the Saginaw River, next to the Crow Island State Game Area.

"We have not learned a damned thing from the past, apparently," Miller said.

Les Weigum, chief of the Environmental Analysis Branch for the Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit, dismisses the deformed bird studies, done by Essexville ecologist James Ludwig, and calls the new facility "an excellent, excellent site."

Weigum says the only impact that Channel Island has had on the bay is creating "a bird sanctuary" for great blue heron and other species.

Channel Island is filled with sediment contaminated with industrial chemicals like polychlorinated biphenyls. The new site will be filled with mud laced with toxic dioxins and furans from past Dow Chemical Co. processing, and will be used for at least 20 years.

The Lone Tree Council, with the National Wildlife Federation and the National Environmental Law Center, has sued the state, Saginaw County and the Army Corps over the new site.

Lone Tree and the others say the proper environmental studies weren't done before construction began a year ago, and a federal water discharge permit should be required for the facility.

But while the case remains in court, construction is nearly finished.

Koski said he expects to begin piling dredgings at the new site this fall. The dredging will clear out the navigational channel of the Upper Saginaw River, from Bay City south to Saginaw.

Some studies suggest there may be environmental problems with the new site.

In the 1980s, Ludwig said he found a high incidence of fatal deformities to young chicks and unhatched embryos on Channel Island. The total rate of deformities, to birds like cormorants and terns, was six times higher than any place else in the Great Lakes, he said.

Since 1974, the Canadian Wildlife Service has sampled herring gull eggs from Channel Island and 14

other sites in the Great Lakes for about 75 compounds, including PCBs.

Chip Weseloh, advisor for wildlife toxicology for the agency's Ontario region, said Channel Island usually comes across as the most contaminated of the 15 sites, which are mostly natural islands.

"The eggs from Channel-Shelter were the dirtiest of the 15 sites from 1998 through 2002," Weseloh recalled.

He hasn't studied the impact on birds, however, and said Channel Island may not be entirely to blame for the tainted eggs.

"We don't know exactly where the birds are getting their contaminants," Weseloh said.

"The gulls don't eat sediments ... but they do eat fish. The fish in the immediate area are contaminated. That would be a prime source."

Ludwig had similar thoughts, saying in the 1980s that he suspected the adult birds' diet of contaminated fish was to blame for the deformities.

In 2003, a Corps study said that sites like Channel Island and the new facility "can prove attractive to many wildlife species" and plants and creatures that live there can accumulate contaminants and pass them up the food chain.

Channel Island spans 284 acres, and looks pretty normal from a boat, with bird nests visible in the trees.

The new facility is smaller, at 220 acres, and looks like a massive, clay coliseum, surrounded by 11-foot high dikes.

Weigum said he doesn't think waterfowl will be attracted to the new site, because there's food and better habitat nearby.

Construction was halted at the new facility earlier this year, however, due to bald eagles that were mating nearby.

Ducks and other wildlife also frequent the Crow Island game area, which is home to at least 50 types of plants and animals, including the least bittern, a threatened species in Michigan.

Weigum says the new site will actually help the environment, removing contaminants and concentrating them into one area. Dredging will go on for about a month every year.

Weigum, who calls himself an environmentalist, said the new site was "heavily studied" and will be safe.

"This is the most secure site we have ever built," he said. "This is absolutely and totally secure."

Weigum said it's not a surprise that some people don't want a spoils facility in their back yard.

"All we can do is do the best we can," he said.

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