

Editorial: Dredging delays hurt

by The Saginaw News

Monday April 21, 2008, 8:37 AM

Would you believe the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers if it said a \$5 million clay pit on the Bay-Saginaw county line could safely contain contaminated Saginaw River dredgings?

The state Department of Environmental Quality doesn't. It says the pit needs a slurry wall to keep toxic runoff out of the river.

The Corps says the 500-acre site is the safest one it has ever designed and doesn't need a slurry wall. Its 14 monitoring wells will alert engineers to any leak that needs sealing.

So now the DEQ is threatening a time-consuming lawsuit if it doesn't get its way. The Corps says go ahead, we'll just drop you like a hot rock, take our \$2 million and shift it to any of dozens of U.S. cities begging for dredging help.

That puts in jeopardy 280 Saginaw River jobs, 18 businesses, millions of construction dollars, millions in revenue and an already teetering mid-Michigan economy. Saginaw River businesses rely on freighters carrying road salt, fertilizer, limestone, coal -- and materials for a billion-dollar expansion at Hemlock Semiconductor Corp. in Thomas Township.

After years of inattention, silt buildup in the river is costing owners of those boats \$20,000 a load because they can't ferry maximum tonnage, and guess who picks up the tab? We consumers do.

So let's see. Here you have the 208-year-old Army Corps that built and operates the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. It mapped America's frontier and built fortifications on our coastlines. It has surveyed canals, navigation channels and roadways. It got rid of water hazards, built piers, jetties and lighthouses, as well as monuments and other buildings in Washington, D.C.

The Corps helped win World War II with the military facilities it built here and overseas. It has managed construction projects for NASA, the U.S. Postal Service and our allies. It played a big role in the post-9/11 recovery and is doing reconstruction work in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's our nation's main flood control agency, a big hydroelectric energy provider and the leading federal agency in environmental preservation and restoration.

So when Mike O'Bryan, the Corps' chief of engineering and technical services in Detroit, says "you can't ever be 100 percent, but I'm as close

to 100 percent as you can get on my feeling that (the Saginaw/Bay dredging pit) is a totally safe site," well, he speaks with the authority of more than two centuries in the business.

And that's what makes the DEQ's intransigence so maddening. It's putting a questionable safety mandate ahead of the certainty of a safety guarantee. In a callous and obstinate manner, the DEQ is toying with lives and livelihoods in a part of Michigan that is absolutely desperate for economic opportunity.

Saginaw County Public Works Commissioner Jim Koski says the DEQ is totally out of control. He's right.

Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm must, once and for all, constrain this maverick band of bureaucrats before the money it takes to save these businesses and jobs goes to some state that would welcome the Corps' expertise.

Are you listening governor?