



**US Army Corps
of Engineers**
Baltimore District

RECORD OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATION

HONGA RIVER CHANNEL MAINTENANCE DREDGING

DORCHESTER COUNTY, MARYLAND

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Prepared by: **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Baltimore District
2 Hopkins Plaza
Baltimore, Maryland 21201**

**RECORD OF ENVIRONMENTAL CONSIDERATION (REC)
MAINTENANCE DREDGING OF THE HONGA RIVER FEDERAL
NAVIGATION CHANNEL
DORCHESTER COUNTY, MARYLAND**

Authorized Project Description: The Honga River and Tar Bay Project was approved by the River and Harbor Act of 30 August 1935, in accordance with the House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, Document No. 35, 74th Congress, First Session. The project was modified on 30 June 1948, in accordance with House Document No. 580, 80th Congress, Second Session. The Honga River and Tar Bay are located in Dorchester County, Maryland (MD) on either side of Hoopers Island. The project includes two channels: the Honga River Federal Navigation Channel (Honga River Channel) and the Back Creek Federal Navigation Channel (Back Creek Channel). The Honga River Channel is authorized to a depth of seven feet mean lower low water (MLLW) and 60 to 140 feet wide. The Honga River Channel provides access between the Honga River located on the east side of Hoopers Island through Fishing Creek to Tar Bay and the Chesapeake Bay located on the west side of Hoopers Island. The Back Creek Channel is authorized to a depth of seven feet MLLW and 60 feet wide. The Back Creek Channel provides access from the Honga River to the head of Back Creek with a 150-foot-long by 200-foot-wide turning basin. The entire project length is 5.8 miles. This Record of Environmental Consideration (REC) only covers the Honga River Channel.

Background: The Honga River Channel is located south of the Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge along the lower Eastern Shore of the Chesapeake Bay within the Honga River Watershed (MD 8-Digit code: 02130401). The Honga River is designated as a MD Use Class II Waterbody because it can support estuarine and marine aquatic life.

The Honga River Channel is intended to be dredged to its authorized dimensions every three years. However, due to a lack of federal funding, the project was last dredged in 2009 to a depth of six feet in a limited stretch of the channel. The project was last surveyed in 2019. The project has shoaled to a controlling depth of 0.5 feet. The Honga River Channel is a vital link to the productive shellfish and fishery areas of the Chesapeake Bay. Since the channel has not been maintained, recreational boaters and watermen do not use the channel for navigation and instead, use alternate routes that may cause damage to submerged aquatic vegetation (SAV) beds.

Scope: This REC has been prepared in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) of 1969, as amended, the 2022 Council on Environmental Quality's (CEQ) regulations published in 40 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) Part 1500, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) regulations published in 33 CFR 230.9 for Categorical Exclusions, and USACE Engineer Regulation (ER) 200-2-2, Procedures for Implementing NEPA. NEPA compliance for the placement site on Barren Island is covered under the Final Mid-Chesapeake Bay Island Ecosystem Restoration Integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement, dated April 2009, and the Final Supplemental Environmental Assessment – Barren Island Ecosystem Restoration, dated March 2022. Therefore, this REC only covers the Honga River Channel maintenance dredging and pipeline corridors.

Proposed Action: The USACE, Baltimore District proposes to hydraulically dredge approximately 325,000 cubic yards of material consisting primarily of mud/silt from the Honga River Channel to its authorized dimensions. The proposed dredging footprint is approximately 4.65 miles long, 60 to 140 feet wide, and seven feet deep MLLW (Figure 1). A pipeline will

transport the dredged material to a placement site on the southwest side of Barren Island. The location of the pipeline will move periodically as the dredging moves along the channel as shown in Figure 2. Dredging will only be conducted between October 15 and April 15 to minimize impacts to SAV and oysters surrounding the channel and within the location of the pipeline corridors. The dredging is proposed to occur during the winter in fiscal years 2025 and 2026. Dredging is anticipated to take between 3 to 4 months and would be conducted 7 days a week and 24 hours per day. Maintenance dredging of the Honga River Channel should occur every 3 to 5 years as funding allows; however, the Honga River channel has not been dredged since 2009.

Purpose and Need: The purpose of the proposed action is to restore the Honga River Channel to its authorized depth and improve navigation between the Honga River and the Chesapeake Bay. The proposed action is needed to obtain fill material to help with the recovery and restoration of Barren Island as part of the greater Mid-Chesapeake Bay Island Restoration Project.

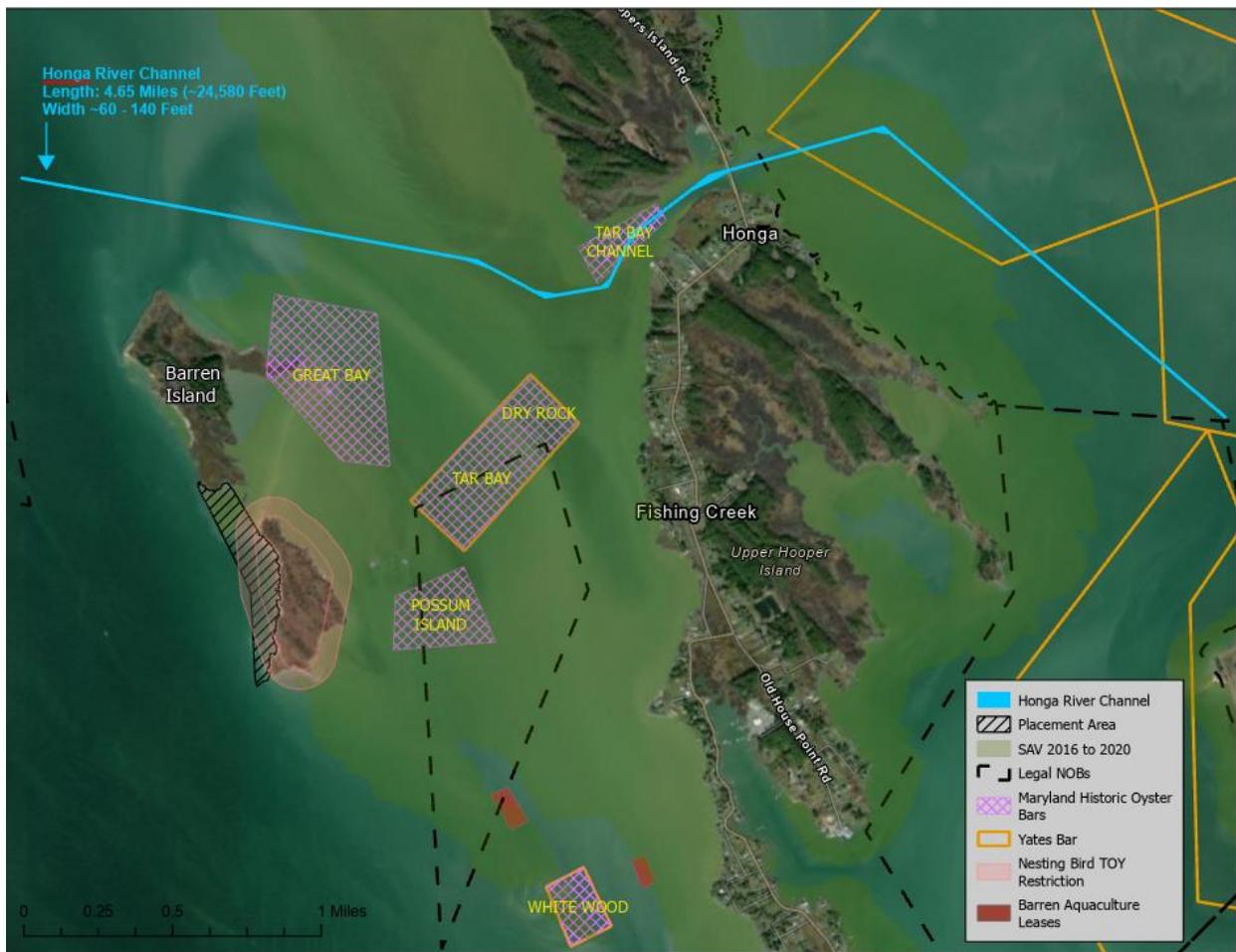


Figure 1. Honga River Channel, Placement Site, and Aquatic Resources in the Proposed Action Area.



Figure 2. Water depths in the Honga River Channel and Approximate Pipeline Locations.

Note: Only one pipeline will be used; however, this figure shows the approximate pipeline locations during different phases of dredging.

When dredging Honga River proper (east of Hooper Island) the dredger will work backwards towards Hooper Island, sending dredged material through a pipeline within the existing channel, which will be connected to one of the pipeline locations west of Hooper Island depending on the contractor’s plan.

Reason for using a REC: The proposed action qualifies for a categorical exclusion from NEPA documentation in accordance with 33 CFR §230.9(c): “Minor maintenance dredging using existing disposal sites” and ER 200-2-2, Categorical Exclusion #3 “Minor maintenance dredging using existing disposal sites.” This project qualifies for a categorical exclusion because the Honga River Channel will be maintenance dredged and the dredged material will be placed into an existing, approved disposal site on Barren Island.

Impacts of the Proposed Action: Table 1 lists the environmental resources/issues that were considered, and the potential adverse impacts the proposed action may have on each resource. The resources that could experience impacts from the proposed action have been addressed in more detail in the subsequent paragraphs. Resource agency coordination is included in Attachments A through E of this REC.

Table 1. Potential Adverse Impacts on Resources from the Proposed Action

RESOURCE	NO IMPACT	SHORT TERM IMPACT	LONG TERM IMPACT
Aesthetics	X		
Climate Change	X		
Land Use	X		
Threatened and Endangered Species	X		
Wetlands	X		
Water Quality		X	
Wild and Scenic Rivers	X		
Fish and Essential Fish Habitat (EFH)		X	
EFH – Habitat Area of Particular Concern		X	
Oysters		X	
Benthic Macroinvertebrates		X	
Birds		X	
Submerged Aquatic Vegetation		X	
Prime and Unique Farmlands	X		
Hazardous and Toxic Substances	X		
Cultural Resources	X		
Tribal Resources	X		
Air Quality		X	
Navigation		X	
Noise		X	
Environmental Justice	X		

Existing Conditions and Potential Impacts

- a. **Land Use:** Dredging will not change land use.

- b. **Threatened and Endangered Species:** The species list generated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) Information for Planning and Consultation (IPaC) system, dated December 11, 2023, states that three listed species may exist within proximity to the proposed action area: the endangered northern long-eared bat (endangered) (*Myotis septentrionalis*), the threatened Eastern black rail (threatened) (*Laterallus jamaicensis ssp. Jamaicensis*), and a candidate species, the monarch butterfly (candidate) (*Danaus plexippus*) (Attachment A). The proposed action will have no effect on the northern-long eared bat or the monarch butterfly. Bird surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 of Barren Island did not identify the presence of the Eastern black rail. Therefore, the proposed action will have no effect on these species.

Several threatened and endangered marine species were identified through the USFWS Planning Aid Report for Barren Island that may be present within or surrounding the proposed action area including the:

- Atlantic Sturgeon (*Acipenser oxyrinchus oxyrinchus*),
- Shortnose Sturgeon (*Acipenser brevirostrum*),
- Green Sea Turtle (*Chelonia mydas*),
- Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtle (*Lepidochelys kempi*),
- Leatherback Sea Turtle (*Dermochelys coriacea*), and
- Loggerhead Sea Turtle (*Caretta caretta*)

Surveys conducted in 2020 and 2021 did not identify the presence of any listed species within the project area. Therefore, the proposed action is expected to have no effect on the above threatened and endangered marine species.

While there are no Endangered Species Act requirements for bald eagles (delisted on August 8, 2007), bald eagles continue to receive protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. One bald eagle nest is present on each remnant of Barren Island. Human activity from placement of the pipeline near Barren Island could disturb nesting bald eagles. There are restrictions on activities within buffers (660 feet) around bald eagle nests from December 15 to June 15. Activities will not occur within the 660-foot buffer of bald eagle nests. Therefore, the proposed action will have no direct effects and is not expected to have any indirect impacts on bald eagles.

- c. **Cultural Resources:** Because the project would consist of dredging a previously dredged channel, USACE determined that the project would have no effect on cultural resources. The Maryland Historical Trust concurred with this determination in their 05 January 2024 response (Attachment B). No further cultural resource investigations are required.
- d. **Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV):** Historically, widgeongrass (*Ruppia cirrhosa*) and eelgrass (*Zostera*) have dominated in areas within and adjacent to the Honga River and mid-Chesapeake Bay. Spring SAV surveys were conducted at Barren Island from June 24 through 28, 2020. The surveys were directed at sampling for the potential presence of horned pondweed (*Zannichellia palustris*) and eelgrass. A total of 196 quadrats were sampled in the various locations at Barren Island. The results from the spring 2020 survey at Barren Island indicated that widgeon grass was the only SAV identified along the sampling transects and was also identified in shallower waters on the eastern side of the Island. Of the 196 quadrats sampled, only 10 of them contained widgeon grass, which is 5% of the total sampled quadrats. The widgeon grass identified around Barren Island was mostly limited to water depths of less than 4 feet, with dense beds observed in protected areas with water depths less than 2 feet. SAV growth along the transects and shallow areas adjacent to the exposed southeastern portion of Barren Island appear to be limited by wave action. During a spring 2021 survey, sparse and patchy areas of widgeongrass were identified along areas of the northeastern shoreline, near the tip of the Tar Bay Wildlife Management Area. SAV percent cover ranged from 0 to 50 percent and 0 to 70 percent along the two transects where SAV were detected.

SAV within the Honga River Channel will be adversely impacted by the proposed dredging. However, in the long term, the dredging would enable completion of the Barren Island restoration project and provide for the preservation of Barren Island and its SAV habitat. In addition, vessels are more likely to use the dredged channel, which would minimize prop scarring in adjacent SAV beds and allow old prop scars to shoal in. To minimize impacts to SAV surrounding the channel and within the pipeline corridors, dredging will be conducted during the winter and outside of the SAV growing season (April 15 to October 15).

- e. **Water Quality:** The proposed action would likely cause minor turbidity in the immediate vicinity of the dredging area due to the physical disturbance of the sediments from the hydraulic dredging activities. A Section 401 Water Quality Certification (WQC) will be obtained from the Maryland Department of the Environment prior to dredging and pipeline placement. Dredging will only be conducted during the winter months, so turbidity will not affect adjacent SAV. Minor turbidity will also occur from placement of the pipeline if the contractor decides not to 'float' the pipes. However, turbidity levels are expected to be localized and minor as the pipeline would be anchored and movement of the pipeline would not occur very regularly.
- f. **Wild and Scenic Rivers:** The Honga River is not part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System; therefore, the Proposed Action is not subject to the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (Scenic Rivers, 2023).
- g. **Birds:** Transient wildlife species including waterfowl, wading birds, raptors, and shorebirds may use the Honga River as a forage and resting place. The proposed action may have minor impacts to migratory wintering waterfowl as the dredging is planned to occur in the late fall and winter when these species are migrating and using the area for foraging and resting. However, these effects are expected to be minor, and the temporary displacement of birds will not likely cause large population impacts. Wildlife is expected to avoid the area during dredging, but there is an abundant amount of similar habitat surrounding the proposed action area for use by these species while dredging is being conducted. Displaced wildlife is expected to return when dredging is complete.
- h. **Benthic Macro-Invertebrates:** Non-mobile benthic organisms attached to or burrowed in the channel bottom, such as worms, polychaetes, anemones, snails and other invertebrates will be adversely impacted due to dredging. However, data collected from other routine dredging projects demonstrates that some recolonization usually occurs within the first year following dredging.
- i. **Oysters:** There are "natural oyster bars" (legal NOBs), Maryland historic oyster bars, and Yates Bars within and surrounding the Honga River Channel (Figure 1). The legal NOBs were formally adopted in 1983 to simplify complex oyster bar boundaries of historic oyster bar locations and to identify where legal oyster harvests are allowed. Maryland historic oyster bars are defined as the oyster bar boundaries where watermen have traditionally harvested oysters for centuries. Yates Bars are oyster bars that were surveyed and named between 1906 and 1911. There is often overlap between the various oyster boundaries. The Honga River Channel traverses

the Tar Bay Channel historic oyster bar and two natural oyster bar areas. A time-of-year restriction (TOYR) exists for projects within 500 yards of oyster habitat to protect oyster resources from dredging impacts. Hydraulic dredging of the Honga River Channel will be conducted within 500 yards of oyster bars. Therefore, USACE will follow the TOYR and will not dredge between June 1 and September 30. By following to TOYR, no impacts to oysters are expected from implementation of the proposed action.

- j. **Fish:** Finfish will be disturbed temporarily by the activity associated with the hydraulic dredge and the resulting turbidity in the immediate vicinity of the dredge operation. Turbidity may cause temporary disorientation for some finfish. Because of their high mobility, most finfish are expected to be able to avoid being directly impacted by dredging activities and would be temporarily displaced. Therefore, it is highly unlikely that finfish will suffer significant impacts as a result of dredging activities.

An Essential Fish Habitat (EFH) worksheet (Attachment C) was prepared in January 2024 for the proposed action area and identified eight species with EFH in the proposed action area:

- Windowpane flounder (*Scopthalmus aquosus*), juvenile and adult stages.
- Bluefish (*Pomatomus saltatrix*), juvenile and adult stages.
- Summer flounder (*Paralichthys dentatus*), larvae, juvenile and adult stages.
- Atlantic butterfish (*Peprilus triancanthus*), eggs and larvae stages.
- Black sea bass (*Centropristus striata*), juveniles and adults.
- Scup (*Stenotomus chrysops*), juveniles and adults.
- Clearnose skate (*Raja eglanteria*), juveniles and adults.

Seasonal fish surveys conducted in 2020-2021 documented one Atlantic butterfish and several bluefish. No summer flounder, windowpane flounder, black sea bass, scup, or clearnose skate were captured in the sampling. Although EFH has been designated in the proposed action area, the fish surveys indicate minimal use of the area by black sea bass, scup, windowpane flounder, clearnose skate, and summer flounder. Potential project effects upon these federally managed species are expected to be of minimal or negligible concern.

Additionally, several other species that are not federally managed but are of concern to NMFS due to their ecological, economic, and/or historical value include sheepshead minnow (*Cyprinodon variegatus variegatus*), striped bass (*Morone saxatilis*), and menhaden (*Brevoortia tyrannus*). While the 2020-2021 surveys did not document the presence of these species within the proposed action area, they were present in the surveys completed in 2009. Dredging could have short-term, negative impacts to these species through temporary disruption of available habitat and displacement to another nearby habitat. Alterations to prey species could have short-term, negative impacts to predator species. These impacts would be expected to end once dredging activities are completed.

The proposed action would have an adverse effect on EFH, Habitat Areas of Particular Concern (HAPC, or on species with designated EFH in the project area). Direct, secondary, and cumulative impacts to EFH, associated species, and HAPC would occur in the near-term as a result of dredging activities. The direct effects to

EFH are temporary as benthic microorganisms are expected to recruit from neighboring areas and recolonize the dredge areas. The impacts are anticipated to end once dredging is complete. However, in the long term, the dredging would enable completion of the Barren Island restoration project and provide for the preservation of Barren Island, its wetlands, and SAV habitat, with subsequent value to fisheries resources. Further, the restoration project could enhance some habitat features for species managed under the Magnuson-Stevens Act by incorporating tidal access in the restored wetlands design, including a diversity of structured habitats, incorporating oysters, and providing a continuity of refugia for aquatic species.

- k. **Prime and Unique Farmlands:** The proposed action is not subject to the Farmland Protection Policy Act because the proposed action will not convert farmland to nonagricultural uses.

- l. **Hazardous, Toxic and Radioactive Waste (HTRW):** No mapped environmental sites of concern or issues occur within 1,000 feet of the Proposed Action area according to an Environmental Data Resources (EDR) report (09 November 2023). The Proposed Action would occur within the footprint of the existing channel where earth was previously disturbed. Dredging is not expected to disturb or release hazardous, toxic, or radioactive substances at levels of concern. The EDR report can be requested separately from this REC through USACE's public notice link.

- m. **Air Quality:** According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA) Greenbook database (USEPA, 2018), Dorchester County is in attainment for all air quality standards. There will be no new permanent sources of air emissions created as part of the proposed action. Furthermore, maintenance dredging is exempt from conformity regulations as identified by the 1993 General Conformity Final Rule 40 CFR 93.152 that monitors and regulates emission-producing actions. The project will result in a minor, temporary increase in emissions from the hydraulic dredging. Emissions produced by the proposed project will not exceed ambient air quality standards and are accounted for in the Maryland State Implementation Plan. For these reasons, the proposed action will have no long-term impact on air quality.

- n. **Navigation:** Dredging will require the use of a barge mounted hydraulic dredge coupled with a pipeline to convey the dredged material to the placement site at Barren Island. The dredge equipment and pipeline may temporarily impede navigation during dredging. Dredging activities would be short-term, and the temporary impediment to navigation is not expected to significantly impact existing water borne transportation since the Honga River is not being used as frequently due to its shall depth. There will be minimal impacts to boat traffic since the proposed work is being done in the late fall and winter when commercial and recreational boating activity is at a low point. Channel obstructions will be minimal and temporary with no significant impacts to boat traffic anticipated. Dredging and any associated changes to locations of aids to navigation will be announced through a Broadcast Notice to Mariners (BNM) and/or a Local Notice to Mariners (LNM) issued by the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG). In addition, the pipeline will be marked in accordance with USACE and USCG regulations, and 33 Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) 88.15. There will be no new access road construction for this

project. The proposed action will have a long-term beneficial effect on navigation. The dredged channel will allow vessels to navigate through Fishing Creek efficiently and safely.

- o. **Noise:** The project will result in temporary increases in noise at the dredging and placement areas and may temporarily disturb fish and wildlife. The noise will be consistent with the commercial nature of the channel. No long-term effects would occur.
- p. **Environmental Justice (Executive Order 12898, 14096, & 14008):** The proposed action will restore the channel to its authorized depth, thereby preserving conditions that sustain commerce within the greater Cambridge economic region. There are no economically disadvantaged communities in or near the proposed action area according to the Council of Environmental Quality Climate and Economic Justice Screening Tool (CEJST). Therefore, the proposed action will have no effect on economically disadvantaged communities. Without dredging the Honga River Channel, local fisherman would have to resort to other, longer routes in order to access the Bay. Longer routes incur more fuel usage for boats as well as potentially more impacts to aquatic resources such as SAV beds and resident fish species. The proposed action will benefit commercial and recreational boat traffic by improving access between Hoopers Island, Maryland, and the Chesapeake Bay.
- q. **Cumulative Effects:** The proposed action coincides with other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions within the vicinity of the proposed project. The Honga River Channel was previously dredged in 2009 and when funding allows, should continue to be dredged every 3 to 5 years. Maintenance dredging would allow easier access to the Chesapeake Bay for recreation and commercial activities such as fishing and boating for local watermen and residents. Dredged material from the Honga River and Tar Bay, Muddy Hook, and Tyler Cove have been used beneficially in the past to create island and wetland habitat nearby and along the shoreline of Barren Island. Proposed dredging of the Honga River Channel would contribute to further restoration of Barren Island as part of the Mid-Chesapeake Bay Restoration Project. Construction at Barren Island is currently underway in 2024 and is expected to receive the dredged material from the Honga River Channel in fiscal years 2025 and 2026. Similar projects in the area include the Fishing Creek and Back Creek maintenance dredging projects. All of the maintenance dredging in the Honga River and Tar Bay area may cause short-term impacts to water quality, noise, air quality, and aquatic resources. However, there would be no long-term, cumulative adverse impacts to resources from these projects. Conversely, long-term benefits of these projects include boosting local economies by maintaining navigation channels for local watermen and residents, creating wildlife habitat through beneficial placement of dredged material, and reducing impacts to aquatic species such as SAV, oysters, and benthic populations by reducing boat traffic outside of the navigation channel.
- r. **Resulting Environmental Impacts:** The Proposed Action is maintenance dredging of an existing channel. The dredged material will be transported via pipeline to the southwest shoreline of Barren Island (placement site is covered under a separate NEPA document). All natural and social environmental factors that may be relevant to the Proposed Action, including the cumulative effects

thereof, have been considered. Preliminary analysis of the Proposed Action anticipates short-term, minor adverse impacts to fish and wildlife, water quality, air quality, navigation, and noise from construction related activities. There are no anticipated adverse impacts to the surrounding floodplain, prime or unique farmlands, threatened and endangered species, cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, and the Proposed Action is not expected to disturb or release hazardous, toxic, or radioactive waste. Dredging will be conducted outside of SAV and oyster TOYRs to minimize impacts to these resources. SAV in the footprint of the channel will be lost as a result of dredging. However, vessels are more likely to use the dredged channel which would minimize prop scarring in adjacent SAV beds and allow old prop scars to shoal in. The proposed action would also permanently impact the HAPC. In the long term, the dredging would enable completion of the Barren Island restoration project and provide for the preservation of Barren Island, its wetlands, and SAV habitat, with subsequent value to fisheries resources.

Compliance with Environmental Laws

The **Coastal Barrier Resources Act (CBRA)** and its amendments prohibit the spending of new federal expenditures that tend to encourage development or modification of coastal barriers that are within the defined Coastal Barrier Resource System. Barren Island (and areas within the vicinity of the island) falls within the jurisdiction of the CBRA; however, it is classified as an “Otherwise Protected Area” (OPA), MD-21P. Under the Act, OPAs are not subject to restriction of Federal funds; therefore, no consultation with USFWS is required specific to CBRA.

Section 404 Clean Water Act (CWA): A 404(b)(1) analysis was performed in December 2023 (Attachment D). No adaptations of the Section 404(b)(1) Guidelines were made relative to this evaluation. Dredging of the Honga River Channel will comply with State water quality standards. The proposed action will not result in significant adverse effects on human health and welfare, including municipal and private water supplies, recreation and commercial fishing, plankton, fish, wildlife, and special aquatic sites. The life stages of aquatic life and other wildlife will not be adversely affected. The proposed action would likely cause minor turbidity in the immediate vicinity of the dredging area due to the physical disturbance of the sediments from the hydraulic dredging activities and movement of the pipeline. On the basis of the guidelines, the proposed action is specified as complying with the inclusion of appropriate and practical conditions to minimize contamination or adverse effects to the aquatic ecosystem.

Section 401 CWA Water Quality Certification (WQC): A Section 401 WQC will be obtained from MDE prior to dredging or pipeline placement activities. USACE will comply with all conditions of the WQC.

Section 307 of the Federal Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972, as amended: USACE certifies that the proposed action complies with and will be conducted in a manner consistent with Section 307 of the Coastal Zone Management Act of 1972 (CZMA) and the approved Program for the state of Maryland (Attachment E). A consistency determination will be obtained from MDE prior to dredging and pipeline placement.

Conclusion

An evaluation of the proposed action determined that USACE undertaking maintenance dredging of the Honga River federal navigation channel will have minor adverse environmental effects. NEPA compliance for the placement site on Barren Island is covered under previous documentation mentioned under the 'scope' section of this REC.

Approved by:

Daniel M. Bierly, P.E.
Chief, Civil Project Development Branch

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