

Press Release from the Southern Environmental Law Center
For Release: January 25, 2011

Contacts:

Chris DeScherer (attorney), SELC, 843-720-5270 or cdescherer@selcsc.org

Andrea Malloy, SCCCL, 843-522-1800 or andream@scccl.org

David Kyler, CSC, 912-638-3612 or susdev@gate.net

Jim Murphy, NWF, 802-552-4325 or jmurphy@nwf.org

Tonya Bonitatibus, SRK, 706-826-8991 or riverkeeper@savannahriverkeeper.org

Corps' Study Shows Deepening of Savannah Harbor Unneeded and Wasteful

ATLANTA—The Corps' environmental analysis of the proposed deepening of the Savannah Harbor is either so fundamentally flawed that it must be redone, or it shows that the project is a colossal waste of valuable resources, according to comments submitted today to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers by the Southern Environmental Law Center on behalf of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, the South Carolina Wildlife Federation, the Center for a Sustainable Coast, the National Wildlife Federation, and the Savannah Riverkeeper.

In its draft Environmental Impact Statement, the Corps asserts that the project has nothing to do with maintaining or increasing business for the Georgia Ports Authority at the Savannah terminal. If the terminal's business is unaffected by the proposed deepening and would continue to grow without it, the conservation groups point out that spending \$600 million in taxpayer money to deepen the river and irreparably harm the river system is unnecessary and wasteful.

If economic studies should determine that the Corps' underlying assumption is incorrect, then the Corps' analysis must be redone as it fails to examine the environmental impact and risks of a busier port.

The conservation groups also highlight the need for a competitive comparison to other Atlantic ports to ensure the best, smartest investment of federal taxpayer money and to minimize damage to natural resources and unnecessary spending.

Until the Corps analyzes regional alternatives for accommodating the larger class of container vessels, it should not propose to sink \$600 million into deepening a 38 mile channel stretching from offshore of Tybee Island all the way to Garden City--a channel so deep it could swallow a four story building.

The proposed deepening of the river itself raises substantial concerns over harm to the river system and life dependent on the river's health. Among the major concerns of deepening are lower oxygen levels in the river that compromise river life and create complications for industrial dischargers upstream and seasonal dead zones compounded by salt water intrusion further into the river and the ground water supplies for local communities on both sides of the river.

Given the expected damage from lower oxygen levels after deepening, the Corps' plans to put the Savannah River on mechanical respirators that inject oxygen into the river. The EPA vetoed a similar attempted fix proposed for the compromised Mississippi River.

Additional comments from each group follow:

“The Corps asserts that the proposed deepening wouldn't affect the port's business, yet it would cost taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, and damage the Savannah River system which makes the proposed deepening a waste of public resources,” said Chris DeScherer a senior attorney with Southern Environmental Law Center. “Until the Corps assesses the best regional location for federal taxpayer investment, moving forward with a \$600 million deepening and accompanying damage would be irresponsible.”

“We didn't find the reassurances we hoped to see in this study for the future integrity of the wildlife refuge, the continued safety of our drinking water, or the economic necessity of the project,” said Andrea Malloy, interim director of the S.C. Coastal Conservation League's South Coast Office. “What this document asserts with certainty is that the salt water in the Savannah Harbor will definitely move further up river if the channel is dredged to 48 feet, cause "unfixable" damage to the refuge, and contaminate vital sources of drinking water. Our drinking water is not up for experimentation.”

“We are very concerned that, contrary to the draft EIS findings, this project remains economically unjustified and fiscally irresponsible,” said David Kyler, executive director of the Center for a Sustainable Coast. “If it is approved as the Corps recommends using the incomplete and faulty analysis in this draft EIS, valuable coastal resources will be degraded and the taxpayers' money will be squandered.”

“If the deepening goes forward as proposed, salt water encroachment and lower oxygen levels would harm wildlife populations with a domino affect through the food chain and river system, even creating dead zones,” said Jim Murphy, attorney for the National Wildlife Federation. “If underlying assumptions about port business and ship traffic change, the Corps' study would need to account for the threat to endangered right whales that give birth off the Georgia coast and are particularly vulnerable to ship strikes.”

“The Savannah River provides over 1.4 million people with their fresh water daily and with 43 industrial outfalls serves as a major economic driver in Georgia,” said Tonya Bonitatibus, Savannah RIVERKEEPER®. “The current Corps' study gives preferential treatment to downstream users over the remaining 375 miles of river and leaves those upstream on the hook for the potential negative impacts to the oxygen in the Savannah harbor.”

###

The Southern Environmental Law Center is a regional nonprofit using the power of the law to protect the health and environment of the Southeast (Virginia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama). Founded in 1986, SELC's team of more than 40 legal and policy experts represent more than

100 partner groups on issues of climate change and energy, air and water quality, forests, the coast and wetlands, transportation, and land use.

WEB: www.SouthernEnvironment.org

TWITTER: http://www.twitter.com/selc_org