

Battle over inlet on the Atlantic

By RICK WARNER

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OREGON INLET — Here, on the ever-shifting sands of the Outer Banks, the forces of nature collide in a treacherous show of force.

One look from the top of the Herbert C. Bonner Bridge on a gusty winter day is enough to convince even the foolhardy that this is not a good place to fool with Mother Nature.

Whipped by 30 mph winds, eight-foot white-caps swirl ominously in the distance, evidence of the powerful currents that make the inlet one of the most dangerous on the East Coast.

Fishermen who make their living by passing through the inlet to Pamlico Sound regard the passageway with a mix of fear and respect. Like a club fighter who steps into the ring with the heavyweight champ, a sea captain traveling through the inlet has only one wish — to get through it all in one piece.

It is, in short, one of nature's grandest battlefields.

The battle that is currently brewing here is man-made, though. At stake, say the participants, are millions of dollars, the authority of numerous government agencies, the ecology of the northern section of the Outer Banks and the economy of several coastal counties.

The battle lines are clearly drawn. On one side are the Army Corps of Engineers, the state of North Carolina, commercial fishermen and a host of local politicians. On the other side are the U.S. Department of Interior, water sportsmen, a number of prominent marine geologists and assorted environmentalists.

At the heart of the controversy is a proposal by the corps to build a massive jetty system to stabilize the volatile inlet, which has migrated about two miles south since a hurricane blasted it onto the map in 1846.

Long lines of rock

Essentially, the jetties would be two long lines of rocks, some weighing up to 30 tons, extending out into the ocean in an effort to stop movement of the inlet.

The project, which would cost an estimated \$80 million, is strongly supported by a coalition of commercial fishermen, state officials and local developers who believe it will make the inlet safer and thus protect and promote the commercial fishing industry in Dare and surrounding counties.

Environmentalists, led by the Interior Department, think otherwise. They say the two jetties, which would extend almost a mile into the sea, and a supplementary sand bypass system would alter the fragile ecology of the area and endanger several types of wildlife.

Both sides are convinced they are right, and neither is about to budge.

The state has more than a passing interest in the project. More than \$7 million has already been spent to develop a state-owned seafood industrial park at Wanchese, a bustling fishing village on nearby Roanoke Island. The park, scheduled to open in April, will provide complete facilities for commercial fishermen, including water, waste treatment and electricity.

Without the jetty system, though, state officials say the seafood park will be largely wasted. Because fishermen must pass through the inlet to get to Wanchese, the officials regard it as the lifeline to the park.

"You can't separate the two (projects)," says Dan E. McDonald, a retired Corps of Engineers colonel who was hired by the state Department of Commerce to oversee development of the seafood park.

"If we don't have a safe and stable inlet, then

what good is the park? You're not going to attract fishermen (to the park) if they have to risk their life every time they go through the inlet."

And risk their lives they do. During the last five years, 32 people have been killed in the unpredictable waters around the inlet, according to U.S. Coast Guard statistics. Dozens of boats have been lost over the years, and many others have been grounded or wrecked.

In an area known as the "Graveyard of the Atlantic," Oregon Inlet is one of the chief undertakers.

"It's a horror story," says Leroy Potter, a ship captain from Southport who frequently passes through the inlet. "You never know when you're going to see a piece of a boat floating out there. It doesn't take but one lick, one thing to go wrong. You don't get a second chance."

Loss of life

"We're losing a lot of lives in that hole," says Gilbert "Moon" Tillett, a veteran fisherman and owner of Moon Tillett Fish Co., one of seven fish-packing companies that line the docks at Wanchese.

"When it gets really rough, a lot of captains just won't go out. And when they don't go out, they can't make a living."

Tillett, 51, was born and raised in Wanchese and has two sons who are sea captains based at the harbor. Wanchese is like that. Generation after generation, the men look to the sea for sustenance, emotional as well as economic.

Business has been booming this season, so much in fact that some local fishermen have had a hard time finding enough markets for their bountiful supplies of flounder, trout, bluefish and other species that make the area a haven for fishermen all along the East Coast.

Dispute over how to tame sea

Continued from page one

But still they are worried, worried that the constant movement of sand along the shoreline will someday make the inlet impassable. Already, great chunks of land have replaced what used to be water under Bonner Bridge. And, despite around-the-clock dredging by the Coast Guard, the situation is getting worse.

If the inlet closed completely, it would mean disaster for thousands of fishermen in the region and the local economies they help support. Since Oregon Inlet is the only opening in the barrier islands between Cape Hatteras and Cape Henry, Va., fishermen would be forced to travel hundreds of miles out of their way to get to Wanchese and other ports in Pamlico and Albemarle sounds.

"If the inlet goes, that's the end of Wanchese," says Timmy Daniels, one of nine brothers who run Wanchese Fish Co., the biggest of the local packing operations. Timmy's father, Malcolm Daniels, was one of the first commercial fishermen in Wanchese.

"We've got to do something about that inlet," says Timmy. "It's scaring people away."

Opponents of the jetty project are also concerned about the inlet. But they think there are better ways to stabilize the channel.

"We have two major objections to the project in its present form," says David Hales, an assistant secretary with the Interior Department. "One, we are not convinced it will work. And two, even if it did work, we feel it would have a harmful environmental impact on the area."

In a series of letters to the corps, Interior officials have outlined a list of specific reservations they have about the project. One of the major concerns is that the jetty system would alter the normal sediment movement along the shore and thereby destroy the natural habitat of wildlife at the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge directly south of the inlet.

"Shoal areas that presently serve as ... feeding and nesting areas for birds will be greatly modified," Hales noted in one letter. "Sea turtle habitat south of the inlet will be lost."

Interior officials also have cast doubts on the effectiveness of a sand bypass system that will be needed to remove sand that is expected to accumulate near the jetties. They say the system, which would cost an additional \$7 million a year, is unproven in high surf conditions and may worsen an already bad erosion problem on the south end of the inlet.

Furthermore, the department

says the corps has not made adequate provisions to handle the many sport fishermen and tourists who would be attracted to the jetties and use them for sightseeing and fishing.

"There are just too many unanswered questions," says William Harris, superintendent of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, which stretches 70 miles from Nags Head to the southern end of Ocracoke Island. Harris' domain includes Oregon Inlet and the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge.

"We are not opposed to making the inlet safe for navigation," he says. "We just don't think the corps is going about it the right way. We have an obligation to preserve (the seashore) as a primitive wilderness area, and that's what we're trying to do."

Several marine geologists, most notably Duke University's Orrin H. Pilkey and Stan Riggs of East Carolina University, contend that the jetty project could force the opening of a new inlet on the Outer Banks.

"Inlets really act as outlets," Pilkey explains. When a storm drives a large volume of water into the sound, the inlet functions as a release valve that allows the excess water to "blow out" into the ocean.

The jetties would prevent this, he

Oregon Inlet

says, by restricting, or channeling, movement of water from sound to ocean. The two lines of rock that made up the jetties would narrow the area in which the water could flow.

"Instead of blowing the water back into the sea, the jetties would cause the blowout of a new inlet. If that happened, it could destroy a lot of wildlife and throw off the entire natural balance of the area."

The Corps of Engineers calls the theory "ridiculous."

"There have always been inlets opening and closing," says Edwin G. Long, chief of engineering at the corps' district headquarters in Wilmington. "In the 1930s, we had the New Inlet open near Buxton and that eventually closed. It's a natural thing. It has nothing to do with jetties."

Long says the jetty system, in combination with a channel improvement project, would actually increase the inlet's capacity to discharge water.

Using scientific simulations, he says, the corps has estimated that the inlet discharged 432,000 cubic feet per second during Hurricane Donna in 1960. With the jetty system and a deeper channel, he says, the inlet could have released 450,000 cubic feet per second.

Long discounts critics who question the feasibility of the jetty sys-

tem.

"I don't think they know what they're talking about," he says. "The Corps of Engineers has been in this business for 200 years. We've designed and built many systems similar to the one at Oregon Inlet."

"I am confident that we can build the system and stabilize the inlet without hurting any of the plants or animals in the area."

For now, both sides are at a standoff.

Last September, the Interior Department informed the corps that it would not issue permits needed to construct the project. The department suggested that if the corps still wanted to build the jetties, it should take the matter to Congress and seek re-authorization of the project. (Congress originally approved the stabilization proposal in 1970.)

Meanwhile, backers of the project are marshaling their forces for yet another drive.

U.S. Rep. Walter B. Jones, the district's congressman, plans to introduce legislation in the new Congress that will remove the property around Oregon Inlet from the National Park Service, which is a part of the Interior Department. This would remove Interior's control of the land and allow the corps to proceed with the project.

One of Jones' aides says the new makeup of Congress should help the cause.

"I would say our chances (for passage) are pretty good," says Floyd J. Lupton, an administrative aide in Jones' office. "Rep. Jones will be the new chairman of the Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee in the House, and that should give him some added leverage."

Both of the district's state senators, Melvin R. Daniels Jr. and J.J. "Monk" Harrington, are also pushing the project. So are the Dare County Board of Commissioners and state Rep. Charles D. Evans, a Dare County resident.

The key, however, could be Ronald Reagan. With a new Republican administration in Washington, many of the Interior Department officials who have led the fight against the jetty project will be leaving. What their successors will do is impossible to predict.

One thing is certain, though. This is one fight that will go the distance.

"Regardless of what the Interior Department says, regardless of what the geologists say, Oregon Inlet will be stabilized," says state Sen. Daniels, a Wanchese native.

"We're like the Chinese. We're very patient people. We've waited a long time for this (project) and we're not going to stop now."