

Project Report
ENDANGERED SPECIES PROGRAM

Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, LA.
Maintenance Dredging
Fiscal Year 1996

Operations Technical Support Branch
USACOE-New Orleans District
504-862-2318

Introduction

This report is submitted to fulfill requirements of the Endangered Species Act and the Incidental Take Statement (ITS) "for sea turtle takes resulting from Hopper Dredging activities" dated September 22, 1995. The New Orleans District submits this preliminary report summarizing the results of Fiscal Year 1996 maintenance dredging of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet, Louisiana, bar channel (Attachment 1). In an effort to implement the reasonable and prudent measures included in the ITS and avoid impacts to sea turtles, maintenance dredging of the Mississippi River-Gulf Outlet Louisiana, bar channel commenced during a period when sea turtle abundance is predicted to be lowest throughout Gulf of Mexico coastal waters.

Scope of Work

Maintenance dredging was conducted by the Government hopper dredge MCFARLAND. Dredging commenced February 10, 1996, and was completed April 17, 1996. Dredging was conducted between approximate channel Mile ~~-8.0~~^{-8.6} and Mile -9.0.

Maintenance dredging activities were conducted during both the time period when sea turtle monitoring was and was not required as described in the Incidental Take Statement dated September 22, 1995. As per reasonable and prudent measure 3. sea turtle observers were placed on board the dredge and sea turtle observing activities commenced on April 1, 1996. The daily and weekly Endangered Species Reports are attached (Attachment 2).

In 1995, and previous years the National Marine Fisheries Service determined that listed whales are unlikely to be adversely affected by hopper dredging in the Gulf of Mexico, consequently, endangered species monitors for whales, bridge observers, were not required. Throughout the maintenance event, dredging operations were conducted following the items listed in reasonable and prudent measures 4. and 6. This included advising the Contractor of potential presence of sea turtles, and reporting, and operating requirements.

Methodology

The dredge worked in the dredge and haul mode. Material was bottom dumped into the designated Ocean Dredged Material Disposal

Site (Figure 1). The dredge was equipped with cages with 4" X 4" screening at the mouth of each lander. These cages remained open prior to April 1, 1996. On April 1, 1996, the cage doors were closed and sea turtle monitoring began. The cages would screen material as it flowed into the hopper via the lander. The cages were equipped with large doors which enabled the sea turtle observers to enter the cages and examine the material retained in the cages by the screening. The screening was inspected for sea turtles and sea turtle parts and cleared by hand of debris as the dredge sailed from the dump site to the dredging site. Fire hoses were utilized to flush mud from the cages during clean out.

RESULTS

The government dredge the MCFARLAND commenced maintenance activities in the bar channel on February 10, 1996, and completed dredging on April 17, 1996. A total of 1,177,600 cubic yards of shoal material was removed by dredge and haul operations and placed in the ODMDS.

On April 1, 1996, the first day of the sea turtle observing operations, significant amounts of debris and dense mud clogged the cage screening. The screened had been fouled with debris even though cage doors had remained open during earlier dredging operations. As a result, during the first hours of the monitoring the screening was so clogged the sea turtle observers were unable to adequately clear the screens. Dredging operations were halted for three hours to clear the screens of debris.

Throughout the dredging operations significant amounts of debris including wood, plastics, and vegetative material; stems, stalks and rhizomes clogged the screening.

Fine grained material is commonly excavated during maintenance of this channel.

During this dredging activity there were no documented incidents with, or sightings of sea turtles.