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## Dredging creates ill will

### Coast Guard, neighbors at odds

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WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH - The Coast Guard's illegal use of boat propellers to scour sand from its harbor at Wrightsville Beach has renewed a feud with neighbors who say their shoreline has been damaged by the dredging.

Two Coast Guard boats normally involved in patrols, inspections and rescues were pressed into service in March to clear sand that had built up under an 80-foot floating dock. The work, which wasn't authorized by a federal permit, spurred an investigation by federal agencies and led the Coast Guard to establish an environmental training program.

But nearby property owners say that's not enough. They say the Coast Guard dredging has caused increased erosion of public and private property along Banks Channel. And they say the Coast Guard got off lightly for the same kind of illegal activities that resulted in fines and criminal penalties in other cases.

#### Sentences for others

The former director of the state ferry system and four employees are awaiting sentencing in federal court on various charges stemming from a similar use of propeller wash to dig a channel for a state ferry in Currituck Sound.

Senior Chief Petty Officer John Sesta, who oversees the Coast Guard station, acknowledged that the dredging was illegal but said it was needed to provide docking space for boats that patrol area waters. "I've got to make sure I can do the job for the people of North Carolina," Sesta said. "To do that, I need to be able to park my boats."

He said he was responsible for the dredging and said the new training will ensure that it won't happen again. He said 400 Coast Guard employees at 35 stations received training as a result of the incident.

Rhett Taber, who owns a house beside the Coast Guard station, said dredging at the Coast Guard station takes sand that would ordinarily fill beaches on Banks Channel. He said adjacent properties have lost more than 60 feet of dry sand on their waterfront property since the station opened about 37 years ago.

"The damage is not isolated here," said Steve Bastian of Raleigh, who also owns a home at Wrightsville Beach. "It extends several hundred feet."

He said a slap on the wrist will not prevent the same thing from happening again when sand refills in the harbor.

The Coast Guard station on the southern end of town maintains an L-shaped fixed pier and two concrete floating docks for its boats. The Coast Guard said in a June 26 report that a buildup of sand caused the pier closest to shore to twist, bending a portion of it and straining water and

electrical connections.

The report said station officers directed crew members on March 8 to moor a 23-foot response boat and a 47-foot lifeboat near the pier and run their engines for up to two hours. According to the report, the propellers dug away sand to a depth of 4 feet.

The Coast Guard said that the agency previously had a permit that would have authorized maintenance dredging at the floating dock but that the permit expired in September 2005.

Sesta, a 25-year veteran who has been at Wrightsville Beach 1 1/2 years, said in an interview last week that crew members thought using the propeller wash would be a quick way to remove the shoaling.

"I didn't know it was against the law," he said. "That was my fault."

### **Corps investigates**

An investigation by the Army Corps of Engineers in August concluded that the boats excavated 200 to 533 cubic yards of material from an 8-by-40-foot area. The amount was "relatively small and within dredge quantities" previously authorized in the boat basin, the report said.

That report said state and federal agencies also determined that replacing sand could result in additional harm.

The property owners challenged the Corps' conclusions, saying it was illogical to say that removing sand caused little harm but putting it back would be harmful. They also contended that the amount of removed material was 1,000 to 2,000 cubic yards.

Ken Jolly, chief of the regulatory division for the Corps' Wilmington district, said Corps officials decided not to bring criminal charges because the dredging was not an intentional violation and was relatively small in size.

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