RECORD OF DECISION

GENERAL REEVALUATION REPORT AND SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT STATEMENT FOR THE POPLAR ISLAND ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION PROJECT

CHESAPEAKE BAY, TALBOT COUNTY, MARYLAND

The integrated General Reevaluation Report and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (GRR/SEIS) for the Poplar Island Environmental Restoration Project (PIERP), dated September, 2005, provides documentation in support of expansion of the Poplar Island, Maryland dredged material beneficial use site in Talbot County, Maryland. Based on the report, the reviews of other Federal, State, and local agencies, input from the public, and the review of my staff, I find the plan recommended by the Chief of Engineers to be technically feasible, economically justified, in compliance with applicable environmental statutes, and in the public interest. Thus, I approve the Poplar Island Environmental Restoration Project Expansion for construction.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) along with the Maryland Port Administration (MPA) as the non-Federal sponsor initiated the Poplar Island Expansion Study to address the dredged material placement capacity shortfall documented in the Baltimore Harbor and Channels Dredged Material Management Plan (DMMP) and Tiered Environmental Impact Statement (USACE, 2005). The expansion of the PIERP was one of four alternatives recommended in the DMMP that was applicable to the upper Chesapeake Bay approach channels to the Port of Baltimore. The GRR/SEIS documents the National Environmental Policy compliance for the proposed expansion of the PIERP, provides information specific to the actions of the GRR, and supplements the Poplar Island Restoration Study, Maryland: Integrated Feasibility Report and Environmental Impact Statement (USACE/MPA, 1996). The expansion study was conducted under the existing Poplar Island project authorization, Section 537 of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 1996, as amended, which allows the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to protect, restore, and create aquatic and ecologically related habitat. The project consists of:

1) construction of a northern lateral expansion of approximately 575 acres of remote island habitat that incorporates an open-water embayment to accommodate about 28 million cubic yards of dredged material from Chesapeake Bay approach channels to the Port of Baltimore located outside (east) of the North Point – Rock Point line and south of the Sassafras River;

2) placement of dredged material from the southern approach channels to the Chesapeake and Delaware (C&D) Canal and other Federal navigation projects under conditions described in the GRR and SEIS;

3) construction of a 5-foot vertical raising of the PIERP upland cells (Cells 2 and 6) and incorporation of design modifications required for PIERP completion;

4) development of recreational and educational features consistent with ecosystem restoration policy.

The GRR/SEIS provides detailed analysis of three alternatives, in addition to the no action alternative. The alternatives consisted of various orientations and scales for island modification along with combinations of lateral and vertical expansion. The alternatives that were evaluated in detail as a basis for plan selection were:

Alternative 1: 575-acre lateral expansion with 60 percent wetlands, 40 percent uplands; plus a 5-ft vertical expansion;
Alternative 2: 575-acre lateral expansion with 50 percent wetlands, 50 percent uplands; plus a 5-ft vertical expansion;
Alternative 3: 575-acre lateral expansion with 29 percent wetlands, 47 percent uplands, 24 percent open-water embayment; plus a 5-ft vertical expansion;
No Action Alternative: (existing project at its authorized configuration): 1,140 acres at 50 percent wetlands, 50 percent uplands.

Alternative 3 is the recommended plan and the environmentally preferable alternative because it would increase the complexity and diversity of habitat types with the lateral expansion, would impact the least amount of benthic habitat, and would produce the greatest number of environmental benefits.

Currently, dredged material from eight Federal navigation channels in the upper Chesapeake Bay is authorized for placement at PIERP. Acceptance of dredged material from the southern approach channels to the C&D Canal and from other Federal, State, County, or local navigation projects was considered as part of the GRR/SEIS. The lateral and vertical expansion components of the recommended plan were designed to accommodate the additional annual placement need of approximately 1.2 million cubic yards (mcy) of dredged material from the southern approach channels to the C&D Canal (south of the Sassafras River), following the mandatory closure of Pooles Island in 2010. In addition, dredged material from other Federal navigation channels is recommended for placement at the PIERP if the material undergoes and passes the required sediment quality evaluations and if other local beneficial uses and placement options are not feasible in the vicinity of the Federal navigation projects.

Under the auspices of the GRR, USACE-Baltimore District assessed the current project and recommended several additional actions required to complete the existing project: raising the existing temporary upland dikes from +23 ft MLLW to +25 ft MLLW to allow for placement and consolidation of the dredged material necessary to reach the original upland target elevation of 20 feet; dredging of a new southern access channel and turning basin to accommodate the closure of Cell 6; restoration of internal borrow sites within wetland Cell 4; construction of temporary cross dikes within wetland Cell 5;

and constructing new discharge, pier, and bulkhead structures to accommodate the closure of Cell 6. These actions will require borrow of sand from outside the existing project footprint, but are necessary actions to successfully complete the existing PIERP.

The recommended plan represents a cost-effective and environmentally beneficial plan to provide approximately 28 mcy of additional placement capacity at Poplar Island and extend the life of the project by approximately 7 years. In addition, this project will create remote island wetland and upland habitat and will include an open-water embayment that will increase habitat diversity. The entire project will continue to be adaptively managed to maximize habitat benefits and dredged material capacity in the most cost-effective manner.

All practicable means were employed to avoid or minimize the environmental and socioeconomic harm from implementing the recommended plan. Environmental monitoring will be performed to ensure regulatory compliance, to document the creation of beneficial habitat, to confirm the expected findings of no significant negative impacts, and to provide operational input on the success of habitat creation and potential changes which will increase the habitat value and utilization.

Technical, environmental, and economic criteria used in the formulation of alternative plans were those specified in the Water Resource Council's Principles and Guidelines. All applicable laws, Executive Orders, regulations and local government plans were considered in the evaluation of the alternatives. Based on review of these evaluations, I find that the public interest would be best served by implementing the recommended plan. This Record of Decision completes the National Environmental Policy Act process.

11 October 2006
Date

John Paul Woodley Jr.
John Paul Woodley
Assistant Secretary of the Army
(Civil Works)