

## If we don't fix it, we can choke on red tape or drown

The topic sounded pretty mundane: dredge spoil sites, places to put silt and gravel scooped out of local rivers. County officials were considering eliminating some from their official list of them in hopes of convincing federal and state officials that the remaining ones were up to snuff and could actually be used as, well, dredge spoil sites.

It seemed like one of those governmental "keep-your-paperwork-up-to-date-and-be-in-compliance" issues that get labeled as DBI — dull, but important — in newsrooms. Most journalists, and I'm no exception, hate dealing with this kind of thing because the explanations you often get are in the impenetrable language of bureaucrats and engineers, rather than English, and making sense out of that can get you into trouble or at least give you a major headache.

But, then along came a letter from Leo Kuntz that helped put things into perspective. He argued against removing any spoil sites from the list, but his message was anything but dull or impenetrable.

"The sediment wedges at the mouths of the Tillamook, Trask, Wilson, Kilchis, Miami and Nehalem rivers are growing at an alarming rate," Kuntz wrote. "I have seen huge changes in just the last year alone ..."

Kuntz said the next 50- or 100-year flood event in this area could generate more property and infrastructure damage and loss of life than the devastating floods of 1996.

Kuntz's credentials indicate he ought to know what he's talking about. He operates Nehalem Marine Mfg., which builds tidal gates and is a contractor on wetland flood control projects. He has spent a lot of time in the county's estuaries and waterways in the last several years. His observations, he said, are based on surveys his company has conducted for the last 10 years.

Regulatory agencies, from the county to the federal level, are ignoring the problem and have blocked every attempt to address it, Kuntz continued.

There's no lack of evidence to back up that statement. Just ask the dairy farmers who have been trying without success for six years to get permission to take out a gravel bar that has been growing in the lower Kilchis, posing a danger to their pastures and herds. Half a dozen federal, state and local agencies — from the Department of Fish and Wildlife to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers — are involved in the permitting process and getting them all to agree on anything is like herding cats.

County officials don't completely disagree with Kuntz.

"He's right," said County Commissioner Tim Josi, who credits Kuntz with identifying what he called the "bathtub effect" that helped make the 1996 floods so bad and led to the installation of tide gates

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along the Wilson River.

But, Josi and Bill Campbell, who runs the county's Community Development Department, don't believe keeping all the dredge spoil sites — there were more than 30 of them on the list — will help.

"To say that removing spoil sites from the list contributes to the problem is not true," Josi said.

"Our goal," Campbell said, "was to increase the probability of getting (dredging) permits by recharacterizing the sites." Er, right. In other words, show the feds and the state 18 good sites and they're less likely to argue with you about whether you can meet their standards for storing what you pull out of the water ... if they let you do it.

County Commissioner Chuck Hurliman said he believes the answer to getting dredging permits is more a matter of navigating the bureaucracy correctly. He should know; he spent 25 years with the monster in the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management.

The county eventually put a couple of sites back on the list. Whether that will really do any good is anybody's guess.

Kuntz will tell you the basic problem about dredging is that we've turned over management of our natural infrastructure and assets to the environmentalists and it isn't working.

He is right, though, when he says preventing floods is good for the environment. Floods put all kinds of bad things in the water.

But, blaming the bureaucracy for thwarting common sense solutions doesn't provide much satisfaction.

After all, each piece of that bureaucracy was created to achieve common sense goals. The Department of Fish and Wildlife is supposed to watch out for the animals and fish in the forests and the rivers. The Department of Environmental Quality is supposed to see to it that the water in the rivers is clean. The Corps of Engineers is supposed to make sure that whatever gets done on these lands is done right.

Yet, while they each do the jobs they were created to do, the rivers get more plugged up and the danger of a catastrophe increases.

Bottom line: We can talk about who's to blame until the cows come home, with or without wet feet. But if we don't fix it, we can expect to strangle on red tape or drown.