



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

April 18, 2012

*No additional cargo volume through Savannah harbor as a result of the harbor deepening....  
We don't expect a long-term change in the number of jobs.*  
-US Army Corps of Engineers

## ***Deeper South***

The Savannah District of the US Army Corps of Engineers recently issued the final report in a feasibility study for dredging the Savannah River to the Georgia Ports Authority's container port upriver from Savannah. The Savannah project would deepen the river from 42 feet to 47 feet, at a cost estimated at \$652 million. Of that, \$297 million would be to mitigate environmental effects.

The Savannah River project is remarkably similar to the project to dredge the Cape Fear River proposed in the NC Department of Transportation's Maritime Strategy Study. The container port in Georgia is 26 miles up the Savannah River from sea—the same distance as the Port of Wilmington on the Cape Fear River. The existing channel in both rivers is now maintained at a depth of 42 feet. There is an issue of beach erosion at Tybee Island due to the channel in the Savannah River, just as we have at Bald Head Island and Caswell Beach at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. There is a problem of penetration of the aquifer, just as further dredging of the Cape Fear River would penetrate the Castle Hayne aquifer. Issues of salt water intrusion upriver and in tidal inlets are the same. Loss of salt marshes. Insufficient oxygen at lower depths. Damage to marine habitat. Same endangered species. There is even a Civil-War era ironclad that would have to be raised in each river—the *CSS Georgia* in the Savannah River, *CSS North Carolina* in the Cape Fear. The Savannah River does not have a nuclear power plant or ammunition terminal, though.

There are many lessons for the Cape Fear in the progress of the Savannah Harbor project, including the lesson of cost growth that we seem to learn over and over. And forget.

The study was started in 1997. The original estimate of the cost of the study is not readily available, but in 2004, the Savannah District of the Corps estimated the cost of the study at \$24,250,000, of which more than \$19 million was Georgia's share. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution* just reported that the cost has reached \$41 million. We don't know Georgia's share.

The cost of the project itself has similarly escalated. The cost authorized by Congress in 1999 was \$230,174,000, which included extensive mitigation measures. The cost estimates in the draft feasibility study issued in November 2010 range from \$425 million (44-foot depth) to \$606 million (48-foot depth). The final report in 2012 estimates \$652 million for 47 feet.

Back at the Cape Fear, the North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources is moving along with a study of "Wilmington Harbor Improvements." First estimated to cost \$5 million, the study cost doubled to \$10.1 million in a few months. The time bomb in that study is the inclusion by the Corps of Engineers of the megaport at Southport as an alternative.