



# Cape Fear Firebird

*The Light of Save the Cape*

July 22, 2014

*If you find yourself in a hole, the first thing to do is stop digging.*  
–Will Rogers

## **Dredgery**

The Wilmington District of the US Army Corps of Engineers has released its feasibility report for the Wilmington Harbor Improvements Project, a \$15 million project to address three problems in the \$384 million channel deepening project, started in 1998 but not yet complete:

***Turning Basin.*** The turning basin at Wilmington is 1200 feet wide, approximately the width of the river, and the minimum for the 965-foot long design vessel. Turning such a vessel requires ideal conditions and extra tug assistance. The Corps had proposed enlarging the basin to 1450 feet by removing 37 acres of marine and wildlife habitat on one side and penetrating an area contaminated with PCPs and creosote on the other. This was determined not to be feasible on economic grounds.

***Battery Island Turn.*** The channel near Southport executes a sharp S-turn around Battery Island that does not comply with Corps standards; the river pilots must use the limits of maneuverability for some vessels and impose draft restrictions. The Corps now proposes to widen the channel at this turn, and although it still would not meet standards, the pilots indicate approval. But this brings the channel 350 feet closer to Battery Island, nesting place for 12% of the State's white ibis population, exacerbating a long-standing erosion problem from channel traffic. The Corps disregards that.

We have proposed in our comments, instead of taking the dredging spoil out to sea, to use the spoil to build up Battery Island to compensate for past and future erosion of this important habitat.

***Bald Head Island Entrance Channel.*** The channel through the river mouth, 500-feet wide and 44-feet deep in an area where the historic natural depth is 12 feet, rapidly fills with sand captured from the beaches at Bald Head and Caswell Beach. Ship movements are restricted and beach users are desperate. The Corps proposes to move the channel slightly to the west, which may have navigational benefits but would do nothing for the beach erosion problem. This ignores the fundamental issue, the lack of assured funding for the Sand Management Plan, a plan presented in 2000 to remove the sand from the channel and put it back on the beaches from whence it came. The required biennial dredging sometimes has not occurred, because special appropriations did not occur.

We have proposed in our comment letter that the project cost (to be obtained from Congress and the State legislature), include a fund sufficient to pay the biennial cost of the Sand Management Plan for the project duration, fifty years. This is not preposterous, because recent (2014) federal legislation requires the proceeds of the Harbor Maintenance Tax be used for harbor maintenance instead of going into the general fund. Taking that into account would reduce the amount of prefunding required substantially. Maybe entirely. This plan would take some ingenuity and financial acumen to implement, but it would solve a problem that has vexed people for a decade.