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## Silt Buildup Muddies Trade on River

*After Floods, Extra Sediment in the Mississippi Trips Up Shippers, Which Want the Government to Spend More on Dredging*

By [CAMERON MCWHIRTER](#)

PAULINA, La.—Historic flooding this year carried an estimated 60 million cubic yards of sediment down America's largest river system, transforming the winding lower Mississippi into a dangerous obstacle course for large commercial ships and raising transportation costs.

Shippers of grain, oil, coal and other commodities now want the Army Corps of Engineers to spend an additional \$95 million on dredging to fix the problem. Mother Nature's timing couldn't be any worse, with record floods hitting just as the federal government is seeking ways to save money. The Corps budget this year has allocated less to dredging than last year.

The Mississippi River is a major thoroughfare for commerce, ferrying key American exports, including grain, corn and soybeans, and imports such as steel, rubber and coffee. A third of the nation's oil comes up the river to refineries in Louisiana.

But the silt brought by the recent flooding has made the river more shallow, which translates to lighter cargo loads and more trips, raising costs. River pilots earlier this year warned ships to lighten loads to meet new restrictions on draft—the distance between the waterline and the ship's bottom—from 45 feet to 43 feet along sections of the lower Mississippi. The Big River Coalition, an industry group, estimates that on average each foot of lost draft costs shippers an extra \$1 million per ship.

"It's killing us," said Jack Wells, president of Emerald International, a coal exporter based in Florence, Ky. Mr. Wells said he expected to lose \$25 million in revenue and bear about \$4 million in additional ocean freight costs because more ships are required and shipping down the river takes longer.

Heavy rains and melting snow this year have caused record flooding in many parts of the U.S., from Montana and Minnesota to Ohio and Pennsylvania and down to Louisiana. Farmland has been flooded, people have been evacuated, and the Corps estimates that along the Mississippi River alone it will have to spend an additional \$1 billion to \$2 billion to repair levees and floodways damaged by flood waters not seen since the 1920s.

The Mississippi River and its tributaries annually carry tons of silt down from as far away as Canada to the lower Mississippi. To keep the river navigable for large ships, the Corps spends millions of dollars every year to dredge. In past years, when it went over budget, the Corps shifted money from other projects to cover dredging, in what it calls "reprogramming." This year, "we simply have no sources to reprogram from," said Michael Ensich, chief of operations of the Corps's lakes and rivers division.

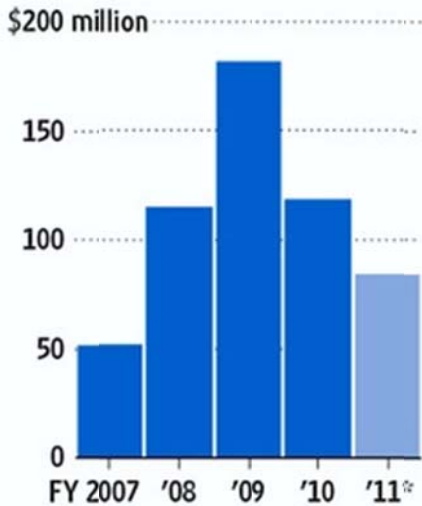
Michelle Spraul, operations manager for the Corps's dredging on the lower Mississippi, pores over charts from sonar readings every day to figure out where to send the dredges she has. "It's a juggling act," she said in an interview abroad a Corps dredge anchored in the river near Paulina, a small community west of New Orleans. In an average year, Corps dredges remove about 35 million cubic yards of silt from the lower Mississippi, Ms. Spraul said.

The dredging problem has been growing since late last year, when the Corps told shippers that it was likely to run short of funds for dredging of the lower Mississippi to the depths and widths they have come to expect.

The Corps also didn't guarantee the widths of the river channels. During the floods, high water made navigation easier, but as levels now drop, silt clumped at bends along the river and at the Southwest Pass, a channel leading to the Gulf of Mexico, poses hazards. This shrinking of the river's dimensions is like losing lanes on a highway, shippers say.

## Scraping By

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers  
spending on dredging the lower  
Mississippi River, from Baton  
Rouge, La., to the Gulf of Mexico



\*money allocated so far

Note: Fiscal year ends Sept. 30

Source: Big River Coalition, an industry group

In fiscal 2010, the Corps spent \$119 million to keep the lower Mississippi dredged. This fiscal year, the Corps budgeted \$84 million. Shippers estimate that dredging to normal river depths and widths could cost more than \$170 million.

The situation hurts U.S. competitiveness abroad by adding to the cost of exports and risks accidents that could shut down the river to large commercial traffic, according to industry, agriculture and shipping interests along the river and its tributaries.

"We need to start moving now before the situation gets out of control," said Rick Calhoun, president of Cargo Carriers, a subsidiary of Cargill, and part of the Big River Coalition, which is pushing for the \$95 million in additional dredging money.

So far the White House, locked in a showdown with Republicans on next year's budget, says only that it is reviewing the situation. "The administration has not made a determination about whether a supplemental funding request is necessary," said Meg Reilly, an Office of Management and Budget spokeswoman.

Efforts to get funding via legislation are moving through the House, but are far from passage.

Sen. David Vitter, a Republican from Louisiana, said he strongly supported more dredging funds but that any additional money would require reductions elsewhere in the federal budget for his Republican colleagues to come aboard. He wouldn't say where those cuts should be, but noted that many Congressional leaders now think an emergency supplemental bill for recent floods and tornadoes is coming. Such a bill should include dredging money, he said.

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