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OHM, SELC Challenge Unprecedented Changes to Georgia Dredging Windows

Savannah, GA— Today, the coastal Georgia nonprofit One Hundred Miles (OHM), represented by the Southern Environmental Law Center (SELC), [filed a challenge](#) against the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' unlawful decision to eliminate highly successful seasonal limitations on dredging projects that have protected sea turtles and other marine life for decades.

Because hopper dredging can be harmful to sea turtles, fisheries, and other coastal wildlife, the Corps has historically conducted dredging activity in Georgia during the winter months (December 15-March 31), when adult loggerheads and other sensitive species are far less abundant in Georgia's coastal waters.

The Corps is now proposing to conduct annual, year-round operation and maintenance dredging, and intends to begin dredging Brunswick Harbor as early as mid-May. The timing presents an even greater risk given that Georgia's loggerhead nesting season traditionally begins May 1 and continues until October. The first nest of the 2021 season was discovered on Little Cumberland Island this past Saturday, May 1.

The lawsuit and motion for a preliminary injunction filed with the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Georgia allege that the Corps did not conduct the environmental review required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

"State and federal agencies have relied on seasonal dredging windows for decades for the simple fact that these windows have proven to be effective in reducing risks to sea turtles and other coastal wildlife," said Megan Huynh, Senior Attorney for the Southern Environmental Law Center. "The Corps has not fully studied the impacts of this harmful about-face, nor has it offered adequate opportunities for public comment."

The Corps' proposed year-round dredging goes against strong opposition from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR). According to DNR's scientific analysis, spring and summer dredging could conceivably kill as many as 87% of the females nesting in the vicinity of the Brunswick shipping channel, and 47% of those near the Savannah shipping channel. Because loggerheads are slow to reach reproductive maturity, it will take at least another 30 years to replace each nesting turtle killed in the population.

Both OHM and SELC agree that routine operations and management dredging plays an essential role in keeping Georgia's harbors safe and navigable—but assert that these needs can continue to be safely met in adhering to established winter dredging windows, as has been done for three decades. Further, they reject the Corps' claims that winter dredging poses a risk to the North Atlantic right whale, pointing to more than three decades of scientific data showing no injuries, fatalities, or other interactions between dredge vessels and right whales.

"Georgia's coast must continue to be a safe place for both our ships and our wildlife," said Megan Desrosiers, President/CEO of One Hundred Miles. "We are committed to ensuring that our harbors are responsibly maintained and that our beloved wildlife, like loggerhead sea turtles and

North Atlantic right whales, are protected—just as they have been over the past 30 years of winter dredging. There is no justifiable reason for the Corps to remove these windows now.”

DNR’s recent two-week comment period in March 2021 generated more than 1,500 letters in opposition to year-round maintenance dredging in connection with the Brunswick Harbor Modification Study—a testament to Georgia’s long commitment to sea turtle conservation.

The Georgia coast is home to the oldest loggerhead nesting project in the world, started in 1964 on Little Cumberland Island. Since that time, the Georgia Sea Turtle Cooperative has grown to include hundreds of dedicated volunteers, researchers, and federal and state employees who devote thousands of hours and significant financial resources every year to protecting loggerhead sea turtles and the habitats on which they depend.

“Our state has long rallied around our loggerhead sea turtles and invested in their protection,” said Catherine Ridley, Coordinator for the St. Simons Island Sea Turtle Project and Vice President of Education and Communications at One Hundred Miles. “Georgians aren’t about to let the Corps throw away nearly six decades of conservation progress based on their illogical arguments and complete disregard for scientific data. We have too much to lose—and as the overwhelming public outcry makes clear, we won’t stand for it.”

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About One Hundred Miles: *One Hundred Miles is a nonprofit conservation organization with a mission of protecting and preserving Georgia’s 100-mile coast through advocacy, education, and public engagement. Founded in 2013, OHM is the only organization focused on combatting the multiple threats to Georgia’s entire 100-mile coast and promoting the significance of its robust wildlife, vast landscapes, and vibrant communities. Our team of ten employees works out of offices in Savannah and Brunswick to empower citizens to fight poor decision-making that threatens our coast and to participate in important community dialogues about growth, sea level rise, economic development, and conservation. OneHundredMiles.org*

About Southern Environmental Law Center: *For more than 30 years, the Southern Environmental Law Center has used the power of the law to champion the environment of the Southeast. With over 80 attorneys and nine offices across the region, SELC is widely recognized as the Southeast’s foremost environmental organization and regional leader. SELC works on a full range of environmental issues to protect our natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region. www.SouthernEnvironment.org*