

Letter to the Editor: Marine Safety for All

The February 23 edition of the *Port Lavaca Wave* highlighted concerns of the Matagorda Bay Pilots Association, who favor a now-withdrawn decision to widen and deepen the Matagorda Ship Channel. For the captains, safety “is the sole reason behind the need for widening and deepening the channel.”

Safety may be the only issue for the captains, but it is not the only reason for the channel expansion. Just look at what Calhoun Port Director Charles Hausmann said at a public meeting in October 2020, when he proclaimed that the channel dredging would transform Point Comfort into Texas’s third “[major oil export center](#)” after Houston and Corpus Christi. The paused project would enable Max Midstream to “[build out its oil exportation operation](#)” by deepening and widening the channel to make way for larger oil tankers.

More oil tanker traffic would actually make the channel less safe for small vessels. Max Midstream projected that expanding the channel would increase its oil export capacity to 650,000 barrels per day—as much as 240 million barrels per year. Transporting this much oil through Matagorda Bay would require 416 additional trips by “Aframax” tankers (each up to 810 feet long) or 596 trips by “Panamax 2” tankers (up to 752 feet long), or some combination. If the expansion moves forward, we could see close to 600 tankers per year, compared to 133 oil tankers during 2021.

This 350% increase in tanker traffic poses a distinct risk to fishermen and others who pilot smaller vessels for work and recreation. During the opening days of shrimp season, as many as 200 shrimp boats have been observed in the Matagorda Ship Channel. Our community has already suffered enough tragedy from marine accidents. We need to make the bay safe for all its users.

While the Army Corps of Engineers hit pause on expanding the entire 26-mile channel from Point Comfort to the Gulf, they are moving forward a [separate project](#) to make the entrance channel safer. At the 4-mile entrance channel that cuts across the Matagorda Peninsula, where pilots often struggle against strong currents, the project will address the bottlenecks and channel scouring that make the entrance channel so dangerous.

Dredging the channel deeper and wider over its 26-mile length would pose another risk to our local fisheries by pumping and dumping more than 21 million cubic yards of sand, silt, and mud onto the bay bottom. Two and a half miles of the channel is located within the Alcoa Superfund Site, where elevated mercury levels were found in sediments adjacent to the channel as recently as 2021. Hausmann said he “had a plan to deal with the mercury if it came up in the dredging.” This is like asking a friend to put their hand on a hot stove while assuring them you have a plan to address any third-degree burns that might result.

The February 23 *Wave* acknowledged that people still eat shrimp from the Bay, despite the fact that the Texas Department of State Health Services has banned fish consumption since 1988

because of the mercury contamination. Stirring up mercury buried beneath the sediment surface could harm the nervous, cardiovascular, renal, and reproductive systems of our neighbors who rely on this food source.

We want safety for the Matagorda Bay Pilots and for their cargoes to be delivered safely. Fishermen, recreational boaters, and families who sustain themselves on the local catch deserve safety too. The Army Corps was right to suspend the project. If they do move it forward, we hope they will consider all of us in their calculations of what is—and is not—in the nation's best interests.

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