

Coos Bay port works to become shipping giant

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
Capital Press

COOS BAY — Wind howls across the channel — the kind of wind that turns umbrellas inside-out. On the water, the ghost-like outline of a ship, scarcely visible through white fog and driving rain, seems to stand still.

It is here the Oregon International Port of Coos Bay has proposed the largest project in its history: expanding the channel to 45 feet deep and 450 feet wide and allowing the port to take its place among the international shipping giants along the West Coast.

People have been talking about the idea for decades. Advocates say it could open new avenues for international trade of agricultural goods and transform the region's economy.

Previous project iterations have stalled, but now experts say the project has a good chance. Its design is 90% complete and the public can likely expect construction to begin in a few years.

Critics, however, say financial, legal and regulatory hurdles remain. Environmental agencies are concerned the project may have negative impacts on the water, wildlife and commercial fishing. And experts say the channel modification is too intimately tied to another more controversial project — the Jordan Cove natural gas pipeline.

The vision

Cross McCullough Memorial Bridge with its green latticework. Look west. There, spanning the channel, is the longest swing span bridge this side of the Mississippi River, opening for a ship to pass.

Navigating this channel isn't easy. Down by Charleston, ships take a hard left, snake through twists and turns, then take a hard right.

"You do not want to hit rock bottom with any of these vessels. It's pretty remarkable. They ride the tides to determine when it's safe to go in and out. But it's very close," said Eric Geyer, director of strategic business development at Roseburg Forest Products, one of the companies that ships from the port.

If the channel were larger, Geyer said, it would be safer and more efficient since ships wouldn't have to synchronize travel with the tides.

Mike Dunning, the port's director of maritime operations, said accommodating large ships is crucial. According to the World Shipping Council, between 1968 and 2018, the average ship's container-carrying capacity has increased by 1,200%.

The channel accommodates ships about 656 feet long, 106 feet wide and 36 feet from the waterline to the bottom of the hull, called draft. If modified, the channel could handle ships about 1,034 feet long, 164 feet wide and with a nearly 45-foot draft.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Contractors dredge the Coos Bay channel. If the channel modification project is approved, the dredging activities will be on a much larger scale.

If the channel is deepened, advocates say, Coos Bay would rival the best ports on the West Coast. In contrast to the Port of Portland, which lies 105 miles up the Columbia River from the Pacific Ocean, Coos Bay's navigation channel at its farthest point is just 15 miles from open ocean.

The Columbia's navigation channel is only 43 feet deep, limiting large and container-heavy ships from traveling upriver. The proposed few extra feet of depth and short channel at Coos Bay, engineers say, would be significantly easier to navigate.

"We have a jewel here. There are only a few deep-water ports on the West Coast, and they're slammed. But here you have this 15-mile channel, deep water, rail lines, it's underutilized and right on the ocean. The North Spit especially could be multi-use," said Dunning.

Now stand on the North Spit, that finger of land separating the bay from the Pacific Ocean. This undeveloped land, owned by the port, is 600 acres of free trade and enterprise zones, meaning future investors can build here and receive economic and tax benefits.

"Our current terminals are pretty antiquated. This is where a brand-new terminal could go," said Margaret Barber, director of external affairs at the port.

Shipping infrastructure

Alongside the channel runs the Coos Bay

Rail Line, which the port has owned since 2010.

"Turns out, there's a lot that goes into buying a railroad," said Barber.

Fixing the railroad has proven expensive. State Sen. Arnie Roblan, D-Coos Bay, said the port has spent about \$50 million improving tracks, bridges and tunnels and has another \$25 million to go: \$20 million from the state, \$5 million from the federal government.

Jeff Reimer, an Oregon State University professor of international trade and agricultural economics, said railroad developments have spawned a "huge amount of controversy."

"Is it a good use of taxpayer money? Some say it is, some think it isn't," said Reimer.

Reimer and other economists say southern Oregon's highway infrastructure is a bit ramshackle. Coos Bay is surrounded by narrow, winding roads — not ideal for shipping.

But Dunning, Roblan and trade experts say the rail lines should suffice for getting cargo to and from the port.

"Better highways would be great, but even if that doesn't happen, more people ship by freight (train) anyway and we can accommodate that," Dunning said.

Trade and ag

Across the tracks, hugging the bay, stand piles of logs and mountains of wood chips.

The port currently ships three main commodities: wood chips, logs and aggregate rock. But Barber's vision is bigger.

"I think ag products would be a great fit here once the project's done," she said.

John Burns, the port's CEO, said one goal of the channel modification is to provide a competitive port with less congestion and more efficiency to agricultural producers.

According to Oregon State University, about 80% of Oregon's agricultural production is marketed out-of-state, half of that overseas. In 2017, according to the latest data from the U.S. Trade Representative, Oregon exported \$1.9 billion in domestic agricultural goods.

Burns said he envisions increased trade across the Pacific Rim, especially with Asia.

According to an economic benefit analysis in the port's documents, for every \$1 spent on the project, it will generate \$3.60.

But trade experts caution against unbri- dled optimism.

"I think the general theme is, sure, there's a lot of untapped potential. It's a great deep-water port. But I guess it's also hard not to be a little skeptical," Reimer said.

Reimer, various trade experts and even Dunning agreed the export market fluctuates, exchange rates play a big role in the movement of commodities and politics impact international trade. Infrastructure alone isn't enough to guarantee robust trade.

Dollars and cents

Unexpected world events may also disrupt the project.

Prior to 2008, Burns said that Maersk, the world's largest shipping company, was preparing to invest hundreds of millions of dollars in a container port at Coos Bay when the Great Recession struck and the company withdrew.

Burns said recent events, too — including the monthlong 2018 to 2019 government shutdown when Congress and the president could not agree on an appropriations bill and the coronavirus pandemic — put kinks in the project's timeline and funding. But Burns said he's optimistic based on conversations with potential investors.

Roblan seemed to share Burns' optimism. The senator, who has followed the project for 16 years, said on a 1-to-10 scale, he'd rank the project a 9 or 10 for "likely to happen."

Public dollars, according to the port, will fund 25% of the \$300 million to \$400 million cost. The other 75% will be shouldered by private partners. The only confirmed sources of funds for the project thus far are the port and the state. The Legislature has already approved \$60 million for the project. Potential private investors' names, Barber said, are "confidential."

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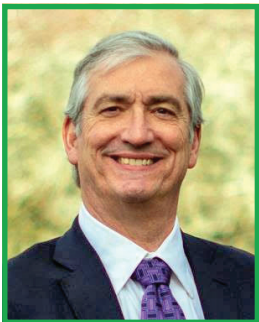
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