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EDITORIAL

Dredging harbors and channels

At a depth of about 40 feet in waters off the Port of Brownsville, Tex., there's an eight-foot pile of tanker-impeding silt with Washington's name on it. That pile and many others off the nation's shores are the result of "shoaling," an accumulation of muck which happens naturally in harbors and channels, but wouldn't be happening in troublesome ways if Washington could somehow be forced to take its traditional federal harbor- and channel-maintenance responsibilities more seriously.

The not exactly headline-grabbing issue of dredging harbors and channels is perennially a low priority for Washington, and will probably fall even lower in President Bush's budget next week as money is allocated for cleaning up the Gulf Coast. The Army Corps of Engineers, which is primarily responsible for dredging, is prey to budget politics each year and invariably cannot dredge as much as it should. But each year President Bush and Congress kick this can down the road, and the obstacles and safety hazards for interstate and international commerce mount.

"At the Port of Brownsville we have suffered an emergency level of shoaling in the entrance of our channel" — 8 feet of shoaling currently — "which is impacting access of vessels with drafts greater than 36 [feet]," or about one-third of total traffic, Bernard List, the director of the Brownsville port, told

the American Association of Port Authorities in frustration last week. Some of the traffic — which at Brownsville consists of bulk cargo, grain and petroleum, among other cargoes — must now be rerouted to Mexico. Wouldn't the irony be great if it turns out that Washington were somehow responsible in these months of oil woes for petroleum tankers being rerouted to Mexico?

This irony rivals the other sorry fact about the country's dredging deficit: The dredging has already been paid for. Since the creation of the federal Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund in 1986, Maersk, APL and other sea carriers have been required to pay into the fund for the specific purpose of dredging. But Washington has used the money to offset the burgeoning federal deficit. There's an estimated \$3 billion surplus currently in the fund, at least on paper, and in theory it should be paying for dredging. Whether it will reappear for that purpose or vanish in Washington's budgeting arcana is anyone's guess. Asked whether this money has become theoretical or if there is any hope of its use for its intended purpose, Aaron Ellis of the association of port authorities, says: "It was real when it was paid."

The American Association of Port Authorities estimates that the tonnage of foreign trade through U.S. ports will nearly double by 2020. How much longer can the feds get away with this vanishing act?