

ADVOCACY BRIEF: DILLINGHAM HARBOR SUSTAINED O&M DREDGING

Critical Infrastructure Rehabilitation, 2025–2026 Operational Realities, and Tribal Access Safeguards

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Dillingham Harbor serves as the indispensable maritime gateway for the Bristol Bay region—a critical regional lifeline for cargo, fuel supply lines, subsistence harvesting, and the management of the world’s largest wild sockeye salmon fishery. Due to extreme geographical isolation and a complete lack of interconnected road infrastructure, Dillingham represents a single point of logistical failure for nine surrounding regional villages. Failing to secure consistent federal and state funding for annual maintenance dredging poses an immediate threat to local food security, energy distribution, and commercial viability. The economic cost of inaction or a prolonged operational shutdown is conservatively estimated at \$13 million annually due to localized supply chain collapses, mandatory barge lighterage surcharges, and direct losses to commercial fishing fleets. This brief establishes the historical, technical, and regulatory justifications for sustained Operations and Maintenance (O&M) appropriations, fully integrating critical operational realities, tribal equity alignments, and capital investments established through the 2025 and 2026 fiscal cycles.

1. THE \$16.25 MILLION STRANDED ASSET RISK (MUNICIPAL CAPITAL ALIGNMENT)

Lobbying efforts for state and federal dredging appropriations must be paired directly with current municipal capital investments. Under the City of Dillingham’s Capital Improvement Plan (CIP) for 2026–2032, the municipality has successfully secured \$11,250,000 in dedicated Federal funding and \$5,000,000 in State funding for the Small Boat Harbor Float Replacement Project. This vital infrastructure upgrade is currently in its 65% design phase, with construction expected to break ground in Spring 2027.

Without consistent and guaranteed federal maintenance dredging of the harbor’s entrance channel and inner basin, accelerated shoaling and silting will physically block vessel ingress and egress. This operational failure presents a severe stranded asset risk: the government will effectively render a \$16.25 million capital improvement project completely useless before construction is even completed. Securing immediate, multi-year O&M dredging funding protects this massive local and state financial commitment, ensuring that modernized docks and floats can fulfill their intended role of supporting the regional fleet.

2. FEDERAL ALIGNMENT WITH TRIBAL ACCESS AND EQUITY MANDATES

In the FY2026 U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) O&M Work Plan, Dillingham Harbor was formally allocated \$1,391,000 for immediate operations, engineering, and maintenance dredging. Crucially, the federal government adjusted its policy framework to justify this appropriation on equity and environmental justice metrics rather than pure commercial tonnage formulas. The USACE explicitly stated that the allocation was granted because 'this project supports access by Native American tribes to their legally recognized historic fishing areas.'

This language connects Dillingham's dredging budget directly to the federal government's trust responsibilities and the preservation of subsistence lifelines for the Curyung Tribe and neighboring indigenous communities under the Bristol Bay Native Association (BBNA). Future advocacy must continually leverage this federal precedent, ensuring that budget directors view the harbor not merely as a commercial asset, but as a mandated civil and tribal lifeline protected under federal equity guidelines.

3. RECENT OPERATIONAL FEASIBILITY & LOCAL REAL ESTATE COMMITMENTS

The operational feasibility of dredging Dillingham Harbor depends heavily on immediate, friction-free coordination between federal contractors and local government. To clear all bureaucratic hurdles for recent and upcoming cycles, the City of Dillingham passed City Ordinance No. 2025-02. This legislation legally cleared and executed an irrevocable, no-cost temporary construction and pipeline easement to the federal government across municipal tracts (including USS 2874 and ADL 1774 adjacent to Harbor Road) specifically designated for the critical May–June dredging window.

By proactively removing real estate and access barriers, the City has proven absolute localized commitment. This framework successfully enabled the recent 2025 dredging season, which executed continuous 24/7 operations from May 10 to June 25. Under contract, Alaska Marine Excavation, LLC deployed the 75-foot cutterhead suction dredge 'Alaskan Eagle' alongside the support tug 'Leroy' to clear the channel immediately prior to the commercial salmon surge. On February 5, 2026, the USACE Alaska District solidified this operational momentum by officially awarding a new three-year Maintenance Dredging contract covering the 2026, 2027, and 2028 seasons. The local easements and multi-year federal contracts are primed; advocacy must now focus on preventing any mid-cycle federal funding shortfalls that could delay the 'Alaskan Eagle' from operating.

4. TECHNICAL & ENVIRONMENTAL FEASIBILITY JUSTIFICATIONS

Operational alternatives, such as establishing permanent upland disposal sites for dredged material, have been systematically evaluated and rejected. Dillingham's immediate coastal topography is highly vulnerable to severe erosion, and the construction of massive upland containment cells is logistically unfeasible, cost-prohibitive, and environmentally disruptive to the local watershed. Consequently, continuing the established method of deep-water dynamic discharge remains the only technically feasible solution.

From an environmental protection standpoint, dredging schedules and disposal methods are specifically engineered to safeguard the region's biological assets. Material is discharged into deep-water channels during high-energy tide cycles to maximize rapid dispersion and prevent sedimentation over critical nearshore habitats. Most importantly, operations are precisely timed to mitigate impacts on out-migrating sockeye salmon smolts, ensuring that the massive commercial fishing engine driving Bristol Bay suffers zero biological degradation from maintenance dredging.

5. DATA INVENTORIES AND SYSTEM METRICS

Table 1: Historical vs. Modern Port Operational Characteristics

Operational Parameter	Historical Baseline	Modern Target / Current Status (2026)
Controlling Channel Depth	2.0 to 5.0 feet MLLW	-2.0 to 2.0 feet MLLW (Post-Dredge Target)
Channel Width & Layout	Varies / Restricted entry	Standardized wide-turn basin for commercial vessels
Seasonal Commercial Fleet Traffic	200 - 300 regional vessels	500+ active commercial fishing vessels
Peak Population / Resource Surge	Approx. 2,200 year-round residents	Exceeds 5,000+ individuals during summer salmon runs

Table 2: Historical Archive of Dredging Quantities and Fiscal Expenditures

Fiscal Year	Volume Extracted (Cubic Yards)	Federal / State Cost (\$)
2016	109,900	\$763,900
2018	100,800	\$671,500
2020	94,700	\$835,400
2022	101,200	\$844,800
2024	112,100	\$1,023,000
2025	109,400	\$1,018,000
2026 Data not yet available	115,000 (Projected)	\$1,050,000