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Infrastructure law helps to dredge Petersburg Harbor for first time in 42 years

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JOINT BASE ELEMENDORF-RICHARDSON – Water spilled over the edges of the clamshell shovel like a fountain as the crane hoisted the final bucket of dredged material. On Jan. 24, the six cubic yard-scoop of shoal marked the completion of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Alaska District's first project funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Now, one of Alaska's coastal communities can safely use their harbor more efficiently.

Located in Southeast Alaska between Juneau and Ketchikan, the Petersburg Navigation Improvements project restored the Petersburg Borough's South Harbor to original design depths ranging from minus 9 to 19 feet and improved general navigation features to allow for safe passage of vessels. The first ever dredging operation within the basin since it was built in 1982 removed about 57,000 cubic yards of material.

"These improvements reflect our renewed commitment to serving as a community partner and our dedication to addressing Petersburg's harbor maintenance needs," said Col. Jeffrey Palazzini, district commander. "Also, it is exciting to see the funds our administration and Congressional delegates worked hard to provide for Alaska come to fruition in the form of this completed project that directly supports Alaskans and the economy."

Before, shallow depths caused transportation inefficiencies and limited access for boats during low tides with some known to high center on the shoals. According to the borough's website, the customer base includes commercial fishing vessels, work boats, recreational and charter vessels on a permanent basis, while some transient and tour ships visit during the summer months. The Petersburg Indian Association uses the harbor for subsistence activities as well.

Western Marine completed the necessary activities within the harbor areas during the past two winter seasons after being awarded a construction contract in May 2022. The project cost about \$7.3 million with the federal government providing 90 percent of the funds. The Petersburg Borough served as the non-federal sponsor and provided the remaining cost share.

"I think this is a great example of a project executed under USACE's 'Continuing Authorities Program,'" said Kim Graham, project manager for the Alaska District. "It was the right application, right amount of money and for the right outcome."

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The program is a group of nine legislative authorities which allows for the enterprise to plan, design and implement certain types of water resources projects without additional project-specific Congressional authorization. Typically, these projects are limited in size, cost, scope and complexity. For Petersburg, the project was executed under Section 107 of the program which covers navigation improvements.

During construction, the project's stakeholders found creative solutions to keep the project delivery on time and costs down while maintaining the day-to-day functions of the facilities. For example, harbor piles were removed and replaced as needed for the contractor to access shallow areas within the tidal zones. The practice alleviated the need for the contractor to access the harbor from land, which would require additional permissions.

"Petersburg has a large commercial fleet, and it was necessary to temporarily relocate more than 100 vessels," said Glorianne Wollen, harbormaster for the Petersburg Borough's Port and Harbor Department. "Communication was essential for scheduling purposes."

In fact, Graham likened the coordination to "trying to install carpet while hosting a house party." Nonetheless, the effective communication paid off and the delicate balance between keeping the harbor open for business while making the upgrades was successful.

The borough is located on the northwest end of Mitkof Island, where the Wrangell Narrows meets Frederick Sound, and it is not connected to the state's road system. Therefore, the ports and harbors serve as vital infrastructure for the area's economy. Dredging the harbors for the first time in 42 years to help the community is precisely the kind of project the infrastructure law was designed to address.

"Petersburg is a waterfront community and good working conditions within our harbors are essential elements to that end," Wollen said. "I often say this unique project was an out-of-body experience given the timeframe and patience it took to navigate the moving parts."

In 2022, USACE received about \$1 billion worth of civil works construction projects in the state following the ratification of the infrastructure law as well as the Disaster Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act. Other major projects funded by these two pieces of legislation include the Port of Nome Modification Project; Lowell Creek Flood Diversion Project in Seward; Moose Creek Dam Modification Project in North Pole; Kenai River Bluffs Erosion Project; Elim Subsistence Harbor Project; and the Barrow Alaska Coastal Erosion Project in Utqiagvik.

Moving forward, USACE will continue to monitor the need for dredging in the catch basin of Petersburg's Middle Harbor. A ribbon-cutting ceremony is being planned for May 2024.

"I'm excited to see the functionality of the harbor," Graham said.

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Photo Captions

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Shown here, a boat is high centered on the shoals within the Petersburg Borough's harbor system. Recently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Alaska District completed the Petersburg Navigation Improvements project funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The project restored the South Harbor to original design depths ranging from minus 9 to 19 feet and improved general navigation features to allow for safe passage of vessels. The first ever dredging operation within the basin since it was built in 1982 removed about 57,000 cubic yards of material. (Photo by Glorianne Wollen, Petersburg Borough's Port and Harbor Department)

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A clamshell dredge hoists shoal from the bottom of Petersburg Borough's harbor system in southeast Alaska. Recently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers – Alaska District completed the Petersburg Navigation Improvements project funded by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. The project restored the South Harbor to original design depths ranging from minus 9 to 19 feet and improved general navigation features to allow for safe passage of vessels. The first ever dredging operation within the basin since it was built in 1982 removed about 57,000 cubic yards of material. (Photo Courtesy of USACE – Alaska District)

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