

Fight brewing over proposed cut at East Matagorda

Written by Mike Price, LSONews.com

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Eddie Douglas was fishing on the south side of East Matagorda Bay, about a mile from the proposed Southwest Cut, and looked out across the bay.

"I see bait working off the point, and there is some bait moving in the gut," Douglas said. "The sun is about to touch the horizon. It all feels right, and I think a fish will hit soon." Shortly thereafter a large speckled trout leaped out of the water with Douglas' lure in its mouth. After putting the trout on his stringer, Douglas gazed at the bay and marsh and said, "Look at this bountiful nature. We are so fortunate to have this."

Members of East Matagorda Bay Foundation fear that if the Southwest Cut is opened, the spot where Eddie was fishing will be covered with silt, have a high salinity or not have water at all. They consider East Matagorda Bay the most pristine bay on the Gulf Coast and they are fighting to keep it that way. George Deshotels, commissioner for Precinct 2 Matagorda County, wants to open a natural cut leading from the southwest corner of East Matagorda Bay to the natural Colorado River channel, commonly known as Rawlings Cut or Southwest Cut.

One reason Deshotels gives for wanting to open the cut is to prevent flooding of Farm-to-Market Road 2031 after heavy rainfall. FM 2031 is a two-lane road on land separating the cut from the former river channel.

Deshotels' proposed bridge and cut would help drain rainfall runoff from East Matagorda Bay into the channel. In addition to improving tidal flow through East Matagorda Bay, the cut will help reduce the accumulation of silt between the jetties 2 miles away at the mouth of the Colorado River. Another reason to open the cut is to help barge traffic at the intersection of the former river channel and the Intracoastal Waterway. Studies show that opening Southwest Cut will reduce water current at this point.

Ed Stavinoha, a board member of the East Matagorda Bay Foundation, has owned property in Sargent since the early 1970s and has watched the popularity of East Matagorda Bay as a fishing destination grow over the years.

"The number of people using this resource is unbelievable, and yet, the bay is still highly productive," Stavinoha said. "We don't know what opening a cut on the southwest side would do. If it's not broke, why fix it?"

Texas Parks and Wildlife gill net surveys show that speckled trout and redfish counts are the highest in East Matagorda since records have been kept. Members of the East Matagorda Bay Foundation believe the high numbers are because of a balanced habitat.

They fear opening Southwest Cut will change the salinity, deposit sediment on oyster reefs and damage the ecology of the bay in other ways yet unknown.

Deshotels submitted an application in 2008 to build a bridge and dredge out Southwest Cut. But that application, which did not call for public input, was denied by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. East Matagorda Bay Foundation hired the law firm of Blackburn and Carter, which sent a letter to the Corps of Engineers showing the permit was flawed.

Deshotels submitted a new application in 2009. This application requires a public notice, which should appear on the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Web site in mid-January.

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