

# Congress poised to pass federal ports bill



## Measure would allow state to continue building up bay islands

Sunset from the waterfront of Tylerton village on Smith Island,... (Sun photo by Amy Davis )  
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WASHINGTON — — A bipartisan water transportation bill that would allow Maryland to unload tons of dredging material on Chesapeake Bay islands — an effort that officials say is critical for the port of Baltimore — won broad support in the House of Representatives on Tuesday and is poised for final approval in the Senate.

Despite concerns raised by budget watchdog groups and some environmentalists, the \$12 billion measure sailed through the politically rancorous House on a 412-4 vote, all but assuring passage in the Senate this week. President Barack Obama is expected to sign the legislation.

If the measure is approved, it would mark the first time in seven years that Congress has authorized spending on dams, harbors and other maritime projects.

In Maryland, the bill would allow officials to continue dumping muck dredged from bay shipping channels onto Poplar Island, which supporters say benefits the ecosystem while allowing the port to prepare for an increase in trade expected from the widening of the Panama Canal. Without the legislation, funding would run out in about two years.

"This bill takes care of the dredging needs of the port, one of the great economic drivers of Maryland," said Sen. Ben Cardin, a Maryland Democrat, one of eight senators who negotiated the final compromise between the House and Senate. "It is very important for us."

More than 5 million cubic yards of silt are dredged from the Chesapeake annually, about 2 million cubic yards of it from bay channels in Maryland.

Much of that sediment has been used to build up Poplar Island off Talbot County into a bird sanctuary — a project that has been praised by state officials as model. The state needs approval to continue using the island.

The legislation would also clear the way for the creation of new disposal sites on James and Barren islands, off Dorchester County, once Poplar runs out of space.

"Keeping our channels properly and safely dredged in order to accommodate some of the largest vessels in the world ... is a necessary year-round process," James J. White, executive director of the Maryland Port Administration, said in a statement. "Finding beneficial ways to

reuse that dredged material such as rebuilding long-eroded islands is something in which we have become a national leader."

The bill would authorize 34 water projects around the country. They include the deepening of a channel between Louisiana and Texas through which a significant portion of the nation's imported crude oil travels, and flood protection efforts in California, North Dakota and Kentucky.

It would also speed the review of maritime projects and require that the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund — paid for by shipping companies — is actually used for the nation's ports. Some have complained that that money was being siphoned off for other expenses. Companies that work at the port of Baltimore contributed roughly \$40 million in fees to that fund in 2012.