Ohio putting more dollars into reuse of dredged materials, as ban on open-lake disposal looms

By Tim Anderson

By July of next year, a practice in Ohio’s commercial harbors will no longer be allowed — the dumping of dredged materials into the open waters of Lake Erie. This ban is the result of a bill passed by the legislature in 2015 (SB 1), and is part of the state’s broader efforts to keep excess nutrients from entering the shallowest of the Great Lakes, causing harmful algal blooms and degrading water quality.

The legislative action from four years ago, along with subsequent funding commitments, has led to an unprecedented effort in the state to find beneficial uses of these materials — the rock, sand, gravel, mud and clay removed from the bottom of shipping channels to keep them safe for navigation.

Earlier this year, the state announced the awarding of close to $10 million for three Ohio port communities’ dredging-related projects. The city of Lorain, for example, will get $4 million to construct a facility where dredged materials will be sent and then reused for soil at an adjacent brownfield site, The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer reports. In all, the state will spend $20 million on projects like these over the course of the biennium. The money comes from a mix of capital funding and general fund dollars authorized under SB 299, a bill passed by lawmakers in 2018 to finance various Lake Erie protection initiatives.

David Emerman, who manages the Lake Erie Dredged Material Program for the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, says three types of reuses have been identified by the state: “dredge to habitat,” “dredge to marketable soil,” and “dredge to farmland.”

In Toledo, a Dredged Material Center for Innovation has opened and is testing the use of these materials to enhance soil quality on agricultural land and to prevent nutrient runoff. The center also is researching the feasibility of dredged materials being used in blended soil products.

Every year, about 1.5 million cubic yards of material is dredged from Ohio’s eight federal navigation channels; activity at Toledo Harbor accounts for 25 percent of all dredging in the Great Lakes.

According to the Great Lakes Dredging Team, a partnership of state and federal agencies from across the basin, anywhere from 30 to 50 percent of the sediment dredged from harbors and channels currently is placed in the open waters of the Great Lakes. Other management practices include placing the materials in confined disposal facilities or using them to combat beach erosion and restore habitat.