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'No significant environmental issues' with deeper channel

By REBECCA FOX

PRELIMINARY reports into the effects of plans to deepen and widen the Otago harbour channel to Port Chalmers have indicated there are "no significant environmental issues", Port Otago chief executive Geoff Plunket says.

However, they did identify that further investigation and analysis was needed to fully understand the issues and effects before Port Otago applied for resource consent, he said.

Port Otago announced last August it was proposing to become the only deep-water port in the South Island by deepening and widening the harbour channel and redeveloping wharves, berths and the container terminal.

To deepen the channel to the required 14m to 15m would involve dredging up to 5 million cubic metres of mostly fine sand with some mud, rock and clay.

Mr Plunket said no serious environmental issues were uncovered by the reports, but



Geoff Plunket

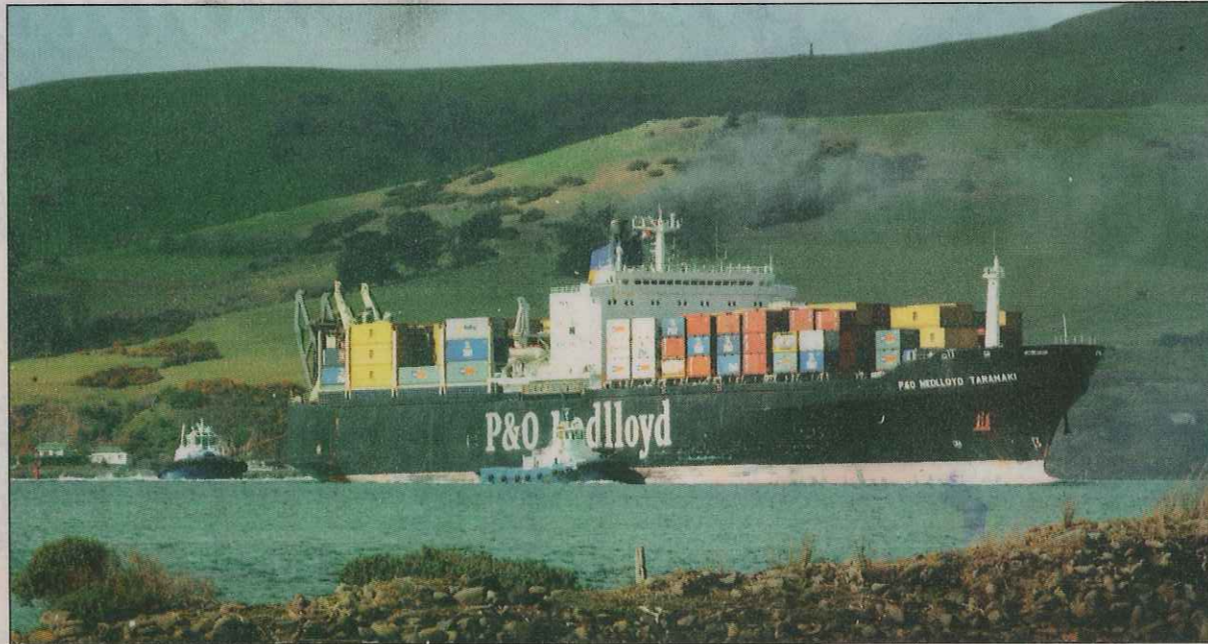
there would be some effects which needed to be studied more closely.

Those studies would take place over the next eight or nine months.

"If it goes to plan, we would be in a position to file for resource consent to deepen the harbour. That is still a year away though."

There were two reports. One was an initial assessment of ecological effects by Dr Mark James of Niwa, fisheries consultant Rick Boyd and Dr Keith Probert, of the University of Otago. The second was an overview of the physical science by Dr Martin Single, of Canterbury University, and Shore Processes and Management Ltd.

Dr Single said in the report initial modelling of harbour hydrodynamics suggested the effects of a deeper channel would not be "significant".



Deeper, wider, better ... Port Otago hopes to dredge the lower harbour channel to allow container ships larger than P&O Nedlloyd Taranaki (seen here arriving in 2003) to reach Port Chalmers.

While there was likely to be a change to the time phase of high tide between Port Chalmers and Dunedin by about six

minutes, there was not likely to be any more than a minor change to the tidal range.

"These changes are unlikely

to change the pattern of sediment transportation."

He recommended further analysis of dredge material and

seabed materials at any disposal sites. He also recommended further modelling of waves and currents to assess the effects of a deeper channel and of bigger ships.

The ecological report said there were gaps in ecological knowledge of the Otago Harbour and immediate offshore region which required further studies before a full assessment could be made of potential effects from the proposed dredging and disposal of seabed materials.

Initial reports indicated any affect on birds or mammals was likely to be short-term.

A survey of main areas alongside the main channel was needed to assess their vulnerability. These areas included the outer harbour, cockle beds and seagrass areas, the Aramoana region and areas around Goat and Quarantine Islands.

The reports had been circulated to members of the consultative group working on the project and would be discussed by them at a meeting on February 11.