

Dredge, baby, dredge!

If President Obama wants to deliver a real stimulus to South Florida and create thousands more jobs for Main Street, he can include \$75 million in the federal budget to dredge the Port of Miami so that bigger cargo ships can unload here. If Gov.-elect Rick Scott wants to stay true to his promise of getting people back to work in Florida, there are 33,000 reasons for Miami's dredging project that he should focus on when he visits the port Wednesday. That's the number of jobs a 50-foot-deep port would create statewide. And when the new Congress gets all worked up about earmarks, a bipartisan coalition of Florida politicians should stand up and chant, "Dredge, baby, dredge!" because this project is no bridge to nowhere.

It will serve to expand Miami's Gateway to the Americas by 98,000 more containers a year -- with a deeper port tied to a cargo rail line in the works and swift truck traffic that will be moving goods out of the port by tunnel and bypassing downtown traffic. Only the Port of Miami is equipped in Florida to have a 50-foot-deep port by 2014, when the expansion of the Panama Canal will be complete to take the so-called post-Panamax ships. And it's the only port in the Southeast that can do this at a nominal price -- \$180 million -- compared to other Atlantic ports vying for dredge funds, like Savannah and Charleston. Only Baltimore and Norfolk currently have ports deep enough on the Atlantic to take in post-Panamax ships. Miami already has federal authorization to go 50-feet under. New York also is building a 50-foot channel but a bridge will limit some ships from using certain terminals.

Because Miami's dredging project is only 2.5 nautical miles in distance, it is cheaper to dredge than others competing for funds. A study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers found that for every dollar invested in Miami's dredge project, \$1.60 will be generated in the nation's economy. A win-win. Other Florida ports -- such as Port Everglades in Broward and the Jacksonville and Tampa ports -- also are looking at deeper ports to bring in the big cargo ships, and they, too, should grow. But only Miami's project has the local and state commitments and federal approval to make it happen by 2014, becoming a transshipment point for goods heading not only to north Florida but south to the Caribbean and Latin America.

Without a deeper port, Miami would lose 15 percent of future container business, hurting the state and local economy. Without a deeper port in Miami, the larger post Panamax ships will call on Freeport in the Bahamas and unload there to smaller ships heading here. The jobs created by a logistics supply chain for offshore transshipment would be lost, as the bigger ships couldn't load and unload here. All the dredge numbers add up to one answer: Port of Miami. Dredge on!
