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Widening and deepening of Panama Canal awarded to Belgium's Dredging International

ANTWERP (2 April 2008) – A prestigious contract for widening and deepening the Panama Canal has been awarded to Dredging International of Belgium. Notification of the contract was given by the Autoridad del Canal de Panamá (ACP), and will secure work for the next four years. The upgrading of the Panama Canal will significantly enhance international trade and navigation (post Panamax vessels), and will include construction of two major complexes of maritime locks – the design of which was developed in the past months by Belgian engineering firms.

The contract which has now been awarded to Dredging International, has been looked forward to for quite some time. It was obtained after very stiff international competition during a tendering process in which all major dredging companies took part. The contract is worth USD 177,5 million and will require the assignment of a great variety of very specialised plant: ocean-going heavy rock cutter suction dredges, trailing hopper dredges, big backhoe dredges, and very advanced self-propelled pontoons for drilling and blasting.

The latest notification of award calls for widening and deepening of the existing canal, as well as the construction of the Pacific entrance and south approach

channel to the third set of locks on the Panama canal. More specifically, a 14,2 km stretch of the canal has to be widened to a minimum width of 225 meter and a minimum depth of minus 15,1 meter. Dredging International will remove a total of 9,07 million m³, of which a rather impressive part of very hard rock will be drilled and blasted. The Panama canal subsoil is notoriously hard, as is well known from its construction history.

Dredging International was able to obtain this prestigious contract by offering an interesting execution method, the assignment of ultramodern heavy dredging plant, and a variety of innovative technology. From way back, Antwerp based Dredging International is a pioneer in innovation, whether in brand new vessel design and construction (Pearl River, d'Artagnan, Pallieter, Brabo), dredging software and electronics, cutting technology, artificial intelligence, the application of drilling and blasting, etc.

The awarding of this prestigious contract to a Belgian company is yet another proof of the well established reputation of Belgian hydraulic engineering companies on European and world markets. The new maritime sea locks that will be built on the Panama canal and which are expected to be tendered later this year, have been designed by Belgian engineering bureaus as well. After construction, these will be the biggest locks in the world, after Antwerp's Berendrecht lock. Previously, Dredging International was involved in almost all construction, upgrading, widening and deepening campaigns on the Suez canal.

The widening and deepening contract which was obtained by Dredging International, also has a rather remarkable facet. It is a fact of history that the digging of the Panama canal was ultimately successfully completed by US Corps of Engineers colonel G.W.Goethals – following the failure by major French and Dutch companies, due to an epidemic of yellow fever and the presence of extremely hard rock. Goethals was born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1855 as the son of Belgian immigrants who had left their home country five years before. The Goethals family originated from the Belgian village of Stekene, in the very backyard of Dredging International's current headquarters. Buried on the West Point military cemetery, Goethals even

today is still honoured as a national hero in the US. His statue prominently features in the forecourt before the ACP main building

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