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## New Soo Lock

### Ships need it; it's time to get serious about funding

*February 12, 2001*

The push for a new lock to handle shipping traffic on the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie has begun in earnest, with Gov. John Engler's intention to commit \$5 million next year toward Michigan's share. Meantime, the federal government has put \$1 million into planning this year. Lock advocates hope to see another \$5 million in next year's federal budget and a commitment as early as the fall for the entire \$225-million project.

The Soo has four locks, but increasingly relies on just one: the Poe, the only one that can accommodate 1,000-foot freighters. After the Poe opened in 1969, shipbuilders designed new vessels to match it. Boats come in with barely five feet to spare side-to-side and minimal space front to back.

Damage to the lock would shut the 1,000-footers either in or out of Lake Superior. That's the chief reason to build a duplicate lock. But a new lock would also cut some of the current delays at the Soo. And the Army Corps of Engineers would love to do lock maintenance in warm weather instead of the dead of winter (see them at work at [www.crrel.usace.army.mil/ierd/webcams/soo/](http://www.crrel.usace.army.mil/ierd/webcams/soo/)) -- but that's an impossibility for the Poe, which can't go out of service for even a day during the shipping season.

The federal government agreed to the need for a new lock way back in 1986, but progress has been slow. The federal OK requires a match from the Great Lakes states, which will be divvied up according to where the boats using the Soo load and unload. Michigan's share is second only to Minnesota's.

The key point is that the new lock must exactly replicate the Poe's dimensions, or boats will be built bigger to fit, and 30 years down the road the same issues will arise.

Locks are one of engineering's simplest but most elegant feats. Built right, they last several lifetimes. The two oldest locks that the new lock will displace work fine: One is still used occasionally in summer for recreational boaters (the other gets opened only when molting ducks get trapped in it).

Construction of a new lock will be an economic bonanza for the eastern Upper Peninsula. But the more important point is that after 30 years of 1,000-footers being launched, a backup lock has become essential.

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