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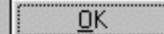
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**Duluth News Tribune**

## Big laker charts course for spring

Crew prepares thousand-foot ship for year's first voyage out of Twin

Ports

BY PETER PASSI  
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

At about midnight tonight, the Paul R. Tregurtha will crunch through ice that has kept it locked in place for months, becoming the first ship to leave the Duluth-Superior port this year.



Renee Knoeber/News Tribune

The 1,013-foot-long harbinger of spring will leave loaded with about 60,000 tons of coal bound for Marquette, Mich.

Mike LaCombe, the first mate aboard the Paul R. Tregurtha, works to pull in the winter lines that have kept the laker safely docked at Superior's Midwest Energy Terminal.

From today until ice again freezes traffic on the Great Lakes, the Tregurtha will see nonstop action, shuttling coal and taconite between ports. At least that's the game plan.

Chief Engineer Eric Weise said, "Whenever we're sitting at dock waiting for repairs, we're not making money, we're losing money." He's determined not to see delays occur on his watch.

The Tregurtha's 20-person crew spent a busy Tuesday making sure she

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was seaworthy again this year and loading her with provisions.

Captain Joe Buonocore said the seasoned crew members know the drill well. "Many of our people have been on this ship for many years. They could do half of what they do blindfolded."

That familiarity with the vessel helps ensure that nothing is overlooked, Buonocore said.

Inspectors left nothing to chance, however. Dennis Clark, a contract surveyor for the American Bureau of Shipping, paid a visit to the Tregurtha on Tuesday to double-check its mechanical systems before signing off on its departure.

Weise said workers took advantage of the winter layover in Duluth to overhaul engines and tackle other maintenance tasks that can't be done when the ship is under way.

Interlake Steamship Co., the Richfield, Ohio-based owner of the Tregurtha, employed two people to stay with the ship throughout the winter and oversee work aboard her.

Kevin Alway, Interlake's fleet safety director, said the boat is never left unattended.

"We've got people aboard this boat working 365 days a year," he said. "A lot of companies shut down when they've tied their boats up for the winter. We may spend more in heating, but I still think it pays off to keep people onboard through the winter.

"It's amazing the gremlins that can show up when you let a boat sit idle."

The Tregurtha wasn't the only one to receive a checkup Tuesday. Crew members, too, were examined to make sure they are ready for duty.

Dave Schenk, a licensed practical nurse, gave arriving crew members complete physicals in a sitting area outside the captain's chambers.

Buonocore said the health of the ship's crew is critical, particularly given its shrinking size. A few years ago, the Tregurtha operated with a crew of 27. Today, 20 people shoulder the work.

Tough economic times have made carriers such as Interlake push hard for improved efficiency, and new technology has helped the company do more with fewer workers. But Buonocore said the company relies



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