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Posted on Wed, Mar. 20, 2002

Duluth News Tribune

Carriers brace for another slow season

BY PETER PASSI
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

While the Paul R. Tregurtha sets sail tonight, many other Great Lakes ships that would normally be busy fitting out will sit idle.

It's a picture that disturbs Glen Nekvasil, vice president of corporate communications for the Cleveland-based Lake Carriers Association, a trade group that represents the operators of U.S.-flag lakers.

After a year that was among the worst in recent memory for the industry, Nekvasil said: "The initial sailing plans we've seen so far indicate this year may be worse than last year."

Lakers' cargo loads have been falling since 1997. Association members moved 102 million tons of material last year, 18 percent less than the 125 million tons they transported in 1997.

In a typical year, most Great Lakes ships would swing into action with the opening of the Soo Locks. But even though the locks will open Monday, some boats won't begin service until mid- to late April.

Nekvasil said nine U.S. ships are not yet scheduled to sail at all because of diminished demand.

"The brunt of the problem comes from steel imports," Nekvasil said.

He pointed out that each ton of slab steel imported into the country eliminates U.S. steel mills' need for 1.3 million tons of taconite, about

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half a ton of fluxstone (a type of limestone used in smelting) and additional metallurgical coal. In all, Nekvasil said it adds up to about 2 tons of lost Great Lakes cargo for every ton of foreign slab steel the U.S. imports.

Nekvasil said recently adopted import tariffs promise to have little impact on steel slab flowing into the U.S.

The bankruptcy of LTV Steel Corp. and the discontinued operation of its mills alone have taken a major toll on carriers. Michael Scheidt, senior vice president of American Steamship Co., based in Williamsville, N.Y., said LTV's demise alone eliminated the shipment of 1 million tons of taconite. As a result, Scheidt said the American Republic, a 634-footer in his fleet, won't be sailing.

Bob Dorn, senior vice president of Interlake Steamship Co., also blames decreased taconite demand for docking the 1,004-foot James R. Barker in Sturgeon Bay. Thousand-footers have historically been among the busiest workhorses of the Great Lakes.

"We're going to hold her back for now," Dorn said of the Barker, adding that maybe she'd see action later this year if demand for taconite pellets improves.

Dorn said that with the exception of the Barker's delayed start, most of Interlake's other vessels -- including the Paul R. Tregurtha -- will sail at about the same time as usual this spring.

He's also optimistic that the nation will come out of recession, fueling new demand for U.S. steel.

Elliott Hughes III, vice president and general manager of the Great Lakes Fleet, based in Duluth, said he is cautiously optimistic about this year.

He said the fleet's vessels are fitting out pretty much as usual this year, with the exception of the 767-foot Arthur M. Anderson, which is undergoing boiler repairs. She's expected to sail in mid-April.

U.S. Steel, former owner of the fleet, is Great Lakes' largest single customer, and it remains in relatively good health compared with other steel producers.

"That's one big reason why we're sailing like we will this year," Hughes said.

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