



Jun. 9, 01:00 EDT

Tossing a life preserver to a Great Lakes industry

Giant tankers would help shipping but at what cost?

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STAFF REPORTER

An American proposal to squeeze giant ocean tankers the size of almost three football fields into the Great Lakes system is making waves in Canada.

While members of the shipping industry are applauding the report by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as an economic lifeline to world trade, environmentalists are sounding the alarm.

Bringing the giant boats up the narrow St. Lawrence Seaway and through the channels connecting the five Great Lakes could be compared to passing a bolder through a delicate vein. It would require intensive operations on the whole system: dredging, widening and rebuilding locks.

"The environmental impacts of this are huge," said Mary Muter, chair of the Georgian Bay Association's environmental committee.

The engineers' report, to be presented to the U.S. Congress, outlines a number of structural changes required to stretch the 70-year-old system so it can accept giant Panamax tankers that now only make it as far as Montreal.

Included are a combination of options: deepening the connecting channels between the Great Lakes by 3 metres; stretching the locks on both the St. Lawrence River and the Welland Canal by about 9 metres in width and more than 120 metres in length; and deepening individual American ports to allow for the entry of such massive vessels.

The report predicts that would increase the loads of goods floating from the Atlantic as far as Duluth, Minn., on the tip of Lake Superior by more than half in 60 years — from 232 million tonnes two years ago to 357 million tonnes in 2060 — transforming lakeside ports such as Detroit and Chicago into major shipping centres.

The activity in Toronto's port would likely more than double, said Mike Doran, the Toronto Port Authority's director of operations.

"We would become a very important port. As would the rest of the ports on the Great Lakes."

The locks on both the Welland Canal and the St. Lawrence, completed in 1932 and 1959 respectively, were built to accommodate seafaring vessels at the time called "handies."

They measure up to 213 metres in length and sink almost 8 metres below the water surface, with loads of

25,000 tonnes.

Since then, the ships have ballooned in size, stretching to more than 300 metres and pulling a draft of 13 metres under more than double the load.

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Ray Johnston

Chamber of Maritime Commerce

Panamax vessels are not entirely unknown to the Great Lakes. The giant vessels, or "salties," can navigate through the channel connecting Lake Michigan to Lake Huron, and through the locks of Sault Ste. Marie into Lake Superior. But they can't nose their way down the St. Clair River or through the locks of the Welland Canal or St. Lawrence River to access the ocean.

"When the seaway was opened, roughly half the ships in the world could use the system. Today, only about 10 per cent of the fleet can pass through," said Ray Johnston, president of the Chamber of Maritime Commerce in Ottawa, whose members include shippers, the St. Lawrence Seaway, ports and shipowners.

"The ultimate question is what's the cost of not doing it? There's been a worrying trend towards declining tonnage in the last decade or so."

By contrast, he said, global shipping traffic is surging with increasing international trade. "What's at stake here is the competitiveness of the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway system," Johnston said.

The proposal by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is in its infant stages. If approved by headquarters, it will be passed on to Congress seeking endorsement for its step into adolescence — a five-year, \$20 million intensive study, said the report's manager, Wayne Schloop.

But given that Congress commissioned the original study, it seems likely to move ahead.

Canadian support is also vital, given that the system is joint territory and 13 of the 15 locks in question are Canadian-owned.

A condition of continuing to the feasibility phase is finding a co-sponsor, which the U.S. army corps hopes to find in Transport Canada.

The St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp., which runs the operation of the locks on the river, has already given its nod of support and is currently lobbying Transport Canada to rustle up \$10 million toward the project, said Camille Répanier, vice-president of strategic and business development for the non-profit organization.

Although Schloop cautions that the plans would see years of intensive engineering, and economic and environmental study, groups on both sides of the border are already raising concerns.

Stephanie Weiss, executive director of Save the River, an American group formed more than 20 years ago, called spending money on a further study "wasteful."

Then there's the multitude of environmental issues: the dredging of animal habitat, the threat of oil spills in winter and the widened channels sucking down water like drains.

"There have never been any withdrawals of water of this magnitude discussed before," said Muter of the Georgian Bay Association.

"This is a very valuable resource. If we start to withdraw water permanently unnecessarily, that sets a dangerous precedent. We're saying don't do the feasibility study."

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