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Critics fear expanding seaway could be trouble for Great Lakes

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By Sarah Kellogg
Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON -- Expanding the St. Lawrence Seaway to allow larger oceangoing freighters into the Great Lakes may make good economic sense for the shipping industry, but it could be a disaster for Michigan's coastlines.

That's why a proposed study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to assess the seaway's future and the possibility of expanding the locks has drawn such fire from environmentalists and citizens groups.

They say the \$20 million, five-year study, which still must be approved by Congress, gives the shipping industry cover in its bid to expand the length of the locks along the Welland Canal in Canada.

"Some things you don't have to study, let alone spend \$20 million dollars on," said Cameron Davis, executive director of the Lake Michigan Federation, an environmental group. "You just know it's a bad idea."

But the Army Corps said the study is designed to decide whether it makes economic, engineering or environmental sense to update the seaway's complex system of canals, rivers and lakes.

"The seaway, if you look at it as a navigation system, is just

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like any other transportation system," said Wayne Schloop, the Army Corps' project manager for the study. "Sooner or later, it needs some repairs just like our highway system or our rail system."

A preliminary reconnaissance report expected later this month from the Army Corps likely will recommend that a long-term feasibility study be conducted.

A meeting scheduled for today in Washington between U.S. and Canadian transportation and seaway officials could help determine the future of the study -- if Canada will foot half the bill for it. Canada has not yet agreed to do so, even though most of the locks are on the Canadian side of the seaway.

The Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway system runs from the Atlantic Ocean to Duluth, Minn., on the shores of Lake Superior. At 2,038 nautical miles, it takes more than eight days to traverse the system. Along the waterway, which borders the United States and Canada, there are 19 locks for ships to maneuver through.

Shipping and port officials say the study is an important tool in determining the future of shipping on the Great Lakes.

"This study proposes to look at ways of improving the system," said Steven Olinek, deputy director of the Detroit/Wayne County Port Authority, which operates ports in Detroit and Ecorse. "It's logical to assume that a 40-year-old piece of infrastructure needs improving. The study may just come out and say it's not environmentally feasible to do this or that. Let's not kill the baby before it's born."

The point of greatest concern is the aging Welland Canal, which has eight locks and links Lake Ontario and Lake Erie. The 27-mile canal, located in Canada and running parallel to the Niagara River, isn't big enough to accommodate modern oceangoing vessels. Its locks range in age from about 40 to 70 years old. Already, there have been structural failures along the canal, requiring a major rehabilitation project.

Experts say expanding the canal to accept 1,000-foot ships could cost between \$10 billion and \$15 billion. Currently, the canal can accept smaller ocean-going ships.

And there are equally distressed areas at other points along the seaway, observers note. Channels and harbors aren't deep enough, say shippers, and there are plans to rehabilitate the locks at Sault Ste. Marie to ensure the 1,000-foot, so-called panamax, ships that travel the lakes can continue to do so.

The 13 panamax freighters in the Great Lakes cannot leave the system because they're too large to fit through the locks at the Welland Canal. Instead they do most of their work shipping iron ore and other products through Lake Superior and down to lakes Michigan, Huron and Erie.

Environmentalists say those 13 are enough, noting that any efforts to refurbish the shipping industry on the lakes, including dredging and draining harbors and rivers, could stir up polluted sediments.

"To really expand shipping in the Great Lakes, they would have to do significant damage to the Great Lakes," damage that would likely result in the introduction of new invasive species, said Davis. "Damage that would cause more water to flow out of the Great Lakes faster, and damage that could destroy our fragile coastal habitats."

Since 1959, more than 2 billion tons of cargo -- valued at an estimated \$300 billion -- have moved through the seaway. Almost 50 percent of the traffic travels to and from overseas ports, especially those in Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

The shippers who work on the Great Lakes say they are putting themselves at risk in pushing the study, but feel it's worth the risk. They say opening the door to ocean container ships and competition from foreign products such as iron ore from Brazil could put them out of business.

"What is the harm in knowing what we can and cannot do?" said Glen Nekvasil, vice president of the Lake Carriers' Association, which represents the shippers on the Great Lakes. "Sure we would like to have the channels be deeper so our ships can load more cargo. The study is going to tell us whether that's possible or not or whether it would be feasible to expand the locks."

Contact reporter Sarah Kellogg at (202) 383-7810 or e-mail her at skellogg@boothnewspapers.com.

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