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### 12/22/02 Both Soo Locks to be drained for winter work

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By JACK STOREY/The Evening News

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SAULT STE. MARIE -- Although commercial shipping has only partially recovered ground lost in last year's recession, a Corps of Engineers official said he expects the Poe Lock will not close early this time around.

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Area Engineer Stan Jacek said ship traffic forecasts show the late season will be reasonably busy this season.

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"It's not likely we will close before the 15th (of January), based on reports we've been getting," Jacek said.

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As it has for the last several years, the MacArthur Lock will close on Boxing Day, Dec. 26 -- leaving the larger and newer Poe Lock to finish off the last three weeks of the shipping season. By regulation, the Locks must close no later than Jan. 15.

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"We have a full schedule of winter work for these old locks," Jacek said.

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Extensive rehabilitation and repair work on both chambers was recently completed after several winters of work on both.

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This winter both will be drained once again for different repair projects, Jacek said.

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The MacArthur Lock will be drained, or "dewatered" shortly after it closes next week, for investigation of a mysterious noise in its "tainter" valve mechanism. The tainter valve is a huge 14-foot square valve that empties the lock at its lower St. Mary's River level.

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Jacek said engineers suspect something awry with that valve, a major component in the MacArthur Lock's operating mechanism.

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Repairs may be made on the spot, he said, if the trouble is of a nature that locks crews can make repairs over the winter. If more extensive work is indicated, Jacek said the lock will be re-filled for the winter to await a different repair plan.

He was not able to suggest if the apparent problem may sideline the lock for an extended period.

Discovery of a cracked hinge pintle during inspection of the 59-year-old lock three years ago forced an elaborate and unanticipated repair project that ultimately involved custom design and casting. The operating lock gate found damaged was sidelined for a full shipping season while custom casting was contracted and the parts were engineered and poured.

Speaking of this winter's trouble with the remarkably trouble-free MacArthur, Jacek said, "We're hoping it's something easy."

Scheduled work on the Poe Lock for the winter involves relatively routine gate repairs.

Elsewhere in the Soo Locks complex, work will continue on a new security system funded after the Sept. 11 attacks. When completed, the new system will cover the entire Soo Locks complex.

In February, Jacek said, the so-called "federal" hydroelectric plant should be automated, culminating a multi-year project. When the project is up and running, the hydroelectric plant that generates much of the power used in the Eastern Upper Peninsula will be operated remotely from Nashville, Tenn.

The Corps will retain hydro plant operators here for deployment in case of a breakdown or other emergencies, but the plant will be operated mainly by remote control when the project is finished.

Once fully closed in mid-January, the locks will remain closed until March 25, when they re-open for the 2003 shipping season.