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## No port dredging this year

SEAWAY MAINTENANCE:Twin Ports dredging money will be diverted

to work below the Soo Locks.

BY PETER PASSI  
NEWS TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Federal money formerly earmarked for dredging in the Twin Ports has been rechanneled to help cover the cost of deepening the St. Mary's River, which links Lake Superior to the lower Great Lakes.

In a typical year, the port of Duluth-Superior spends between \$800,000 and \$1 million on dredging, said Curt Anderson, a construction representative for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

This year, that money will be funneled to Sault Sainte Marie, Mich., where crews are hard at work removing sediment from a section of the St. Mary's River called Little Rapids Cut.

Still, you won't hear any griping about the diversion of dollars from Adolph Ojard, executive director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority.

"The ability to complete work at Little Rapids Cut could immediately benefit our port," Ojard said. "That's why we wholeheartedly endorse the project."

Because of shallow points at Little Rapids Cut, ships transiting the Soo Locks have had to reduce their loads to sit about 6 inches higher in the water than usual, said Ray Skelton, environmental and government affairs director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority.

That's costing ship operators money, Skelton said. Six inches less draft on a laker can equate to a load reduction of about 1,500 tons. On a smaller sea-going vessel, a similar draft adjustment could be achieved at a sacrifice of about 900 tons.

Stan Jacek, an area engineer for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, said crews will attack scattered high spots where sediment has built up in the 15- to 20-mile stretch below the Soo Locks, his home base. In places, soundings show the St. Mary's River is running as much as 1 foot shallower than its target depth -- 28 feet.

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Much of the waterway is deep enough, however, and Jacek said the project will likely involve removing about 100,000 yards of material at a cost of about \$2 million. Work is scheduled to begin in early July and to be completed before the end of the shipping season.

Before the rerouting of money, the Corps of Engineers had planned to contract with a dredging company to remove sediment building up in the cross channel of St. Louis Bay, a short distance from the Duluth Missabe & Iron Range ore docks in Duluth.

Ted Smith, owner of Marine Tech LLC, a Duluth-based company, had hoped to win the bid for the job. Smith estimated his company has handled about 80 percent of dredging work in the Twin Ports to date.

Smith said this is shaping up to be the first time in the past 40 years that no dredging by the Corps will occur in the Twin Ports.

"When you operate a port at the mouth of a river, the work never ends," Smith said, pointing out that sediment continually builds up because of river currents and vessel traffic.

But Corps member Curt Anderson said postponing work on the cross channel for a year will have no significant effect on shipping.

It probably will have a detrimental effect on Marine Tech, however.

Smith said his company typically employs 10 people but will likely shrink to six soon because of a lack of work. He said the postponed Twin Ports project is one of 19 on the Great Lakes that were eliminated this year.

"We'll scrounge and hopefully find more work," Smith said but added: "Everyone else in this business is looking for work, too. With less work to go around, we'll all have to travel more, and bidding will become even more competitive."

Lately, Marine Tech has kept busy working on the upper harbor of Presque Isle at Marquette, Mich., where its workers have been clearing a water intake for a power plant knocked out of service by recent flooding. The plant, owned by Wisconsin Energy Corp., supplies power to the Tilden and Empire taconite plants, both of which have been forced to halt production.

When work in Marquette is completed, Smith suspects he'll have little choice but to lay off some of his employees.

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