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Rep addresses topics in regional teleconference

By KURT HAUGLIE, DMG Writer

WASHINGTON — During a telephone news conference with several newspaper reporters from communities in his 1st Congressional District, U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak touched on a variety of topics, including the dredging of Ontonagon Harbor, the spread of the emerald ash borer into the Upper Peninsula and the death of a suspected terrorist leader in Iraq.

Stupak said although Ontonagon Harbor is small, keeping it dredged is important because two-thirds of the commercial shipping done in the state involves small harbors.

According to a written release from the Army Corps of Engineers, a \$337,500 contract was awarded to MCM Marine Inc. in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. to dredge 39,000 cubic yards of material from the federal navigation channel in Ontonagon Harbor.

Stupak said much of that material comes from the Mineral River.

The dredging of the harbor should begin within the next two weeks, Stupak said.

“By mid-July, Ontonagon Harbor should be ready to go,” he said.

The emerald ash borer has been devastating ash trees in Michigan, Ohio and Indiana since the first populations of the Asian beetle were discovered near Detroit in 2002.

Stupak said since then, the beetle has destroyed 15 million ash trees in the affected areas.

According to the Department of Natural Resources Web site, the emerald ash borer so far in the Upper Peninsula has been found in only a portion of Chippewa County near Sault Ste. Marie.

“If it’s on the east end of the U.P., it’s going to spread,” Stupak said.

The most likely way the beetle is moving into the U.P. is in loads of fire wood brought from downstate, Stupak said. People are supposed to stop after

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crossing the Mackinac Bridge and have loads of fire wood inspected for the insect, but obviously many aren't doing so.

To help combat the spread of the emerald ash borer, Stupak said he's worked to get another \$20 million into the agriculture appropriations bill.

On the consumer protection front, Stupak said he's been involved with an effort to stop the practice of using carbon dioxide to keep meat fresh looking.

"I've been the lead on CO2 in meat," he said.

Although using CO2 does keep meat looking red, Stupak said the longer meat stays on the shelf, the greater the possibility that pathogens, such as e-coli and salmonella can be spread.

Stupak said he and other legislators have asked government officials to work toward ending the practice of allowing the use of CO2 on meat.

"The (Food and Drug Administration) does not seem to be moving in the right direction," he said.

Another consumer issue Stupak said he's working on is the continuing rise in the price of petroleum prices, particularly gasoline and natural gas.

"We continue to push the issue," he said.

A recent bill which addresses the issue of price gouging after Hurricane Katrina is an important step but the bill doesn't address natural gas, Stupak said.

"Hopefully, it won't be a difficult winter (this year)," he said.

Stupak said not long ago, petroleum companies would make a profit of \$5 to \$8 turning a barrel of crude oil into gasoline.

Now, the profit is \$20 per barrel.

"That's a \$12 difference," he said. Stupak said he wants oil companies to explain why their profit margin has increased so much at a time when consumers are facing continuing rising prices at the pump.

Stupak said he's concerned about the rise in the theft of the identities of many military veterans.

"That's becoming more of an issue here," he said.

Stupak said he signed a letter with other Democrats in the House asking President George W. Bush to do all he can to prevent the theft of veterans' identities.

About 2.6 million veterans are at risk, Stupak said.

"We are fearful that once the information is stolen, it could be used to hurt the veterans," he said. "The least we should do is monitor their credit (to make certain it isn't being abused)."

Stupak said the death Wednesday of the suspected al-Qaida leader in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, should make the situation in Iraq better for the American troops and the Iraqi people.

"It's welcome news," Stupak said. "Zarqawi was behind so much violence in the Middle East."

Although the removal of Zarqawi from the scene in Iraq will slow acts of violence, Stupak said he doesn't know how long that will last.

"It's unclear what effect it will have on the insurgency," he said.

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