



## Opening the river

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Commercial shipping has slowed to a trickle along the Saginaw River, but five new barges could signal hope for dock operators such as John Glynn, who continues to watch inventories erode.

The Muskegon-based dredging company Great Lakes Dock & Materials has five barges in the water this week to scoop silt from the Saginaw River.

Within two months, the company will excavate more than 100,000 cubic yards of silt to unclog a shipping channel that has grown so shallow that it trapped several ships this spring.

Project Manager Jan Sickterman said his crews will plunge into the operation this week, working around the clock until the job is finished.

"We will go full-bore on Thursday," he said.

That's good news for Glynn, vice president of Wirt Stone Dock in Buena Vista Township. His dock is down to 20 percent of its normal inventory.

Instead of getting two to three shipments a week, Glynn said the river traffic has slowed to several vessels a month. The ships are smaller and require a tug boat to pull them downstream to a turning basin near James Clements Airport.

"We would like dredging to progress as quickly and smoothly as possible so we can get our inventories built back up," he said. "Right now we are living hand to mouth. Whatever we get goes out."

Dock owners have said silt build-up threatens to sink their businesses, jeopardizing 280 jobs and a shipping channel that supplies 4 million to 6 million tons of stone, fertilizer, cement and coal to the Saginaw Valley each year.

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials declared the shallow shipping conditions in the upper Saginaw River an "emergency" this spring when two boats ran aground in the turning basin north of the Interstate 675 Henry G. Marsh Bridge in Saginaw.

The agency diverted about \$2 million from other projects to dredge the turning basin and a mile of river downstream.

"There is a great need to have this accomplished," said Kevin McNally, chief of the Corps of Engineers' Detroit project office. "The whole reason for this project is to reopen (the river) to commercial shipping."

Great Lakes Dock & Materials, which received the dredging contract, has until early September to deepen the channel to 21 feet. Some parts of the turning basin now are just 13 feet deep.

Sickterman said he probably can have the project done by late August. Using a clamshell-shaped scoop attached to a crane, his company can hoist up to seven cubic yards of silt from the river bottom.

Crews will load that sediment onto barges, which will travel 22 miles downstream to a disposal island at the mouth of the Saginaw River. He said the trek will take the barges between three and four hours each way.

Corps officials say the island has ample space for the dredge spoils associated with the project and likely will accommodate future dredging in the lower Saginaw River.

While the barges can carry about 1,100 cubic yards apiece – a load that still would require almost 100 trips to complete the project – Sickterman said his boats will have to run a little light to navigate the Saginaw River shallows.

Sickterman said his team will start scooping Thursday morning with a crew of 24 people per day.

"We just want to get the dredging done," Glynn said. "Without it, we are out of business."

Ultimately, the corps wants to create a 22-foot-deep shipping channel that will accommodate the freighters of years past. But that will have to wait until the agency completes a 281-acre dump site for dredge spoils in Zilwaukee and Frankenlust townships.

The site, now under construction, will hold up to 3.1 million cubic yards of dredged silt.

The storage basin remains a lightning rod of litigation because of dioxin contamination in the Saginaw River. Frankenlust Township officials and the environmental group Lone Tree Council filed separate lawsuits this spring to keep the corps from breaking ground. Both attempts failed.

Lone Tree Council continues to pursue litigation in U.S. District Court in Bay City to force the corps to conduct a rigorous environmental impact statement on the disposal site before dumping on it. v

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