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## Work to begin on what could become major overhaul of Soo Locks

BY TODD SPANGLER • FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF • JUNE 14, 2009

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WASHINGTON --It's been 23 years since Congress realized another big lock was needed along the St. Marys River at Sault Ste. Marie to protect Great Lakes shipping. Later this month, it will finally get under way.

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On June 30, the Army Corps of Engineers will hold a groundbreaking ceremony on a modest, \$1.9-million project to build coffer dams -- essentially retaining walls in the river -- and start work on what some day will be a lock as big as the neighboring Poe Lock. It represents the first dirt turned on what could be a huge project employing 1,000 people.

If the money keeps coming, that is.

The 41-year-old Poe is the only one of the three operational locks at Sault Ste. Marie big enough to handle 70% of the vessels plying the lakes. About 80 million to 85 million tons of cargo -- much of it iron ore to make steel and coal brought by rail to the lakes to fuel power plants in the east -- move through the locks every year.

Glen Nekvasil is a spokesman for the Lake Carriers Association, the Cleveland-based trade group representing U.S. operators on the Great Lakes. He says should Poe go down, the Soo Locks -- which allow ships to bypass the St. Marys Rapids by raising or dropping 21 feet to make up for the difference in lake levels -- would become all but unusable.

"They could not even meet the needs of this depressed economy," Nekvasil said.

### Big locks cost big money

But big locks like the one needed in Sault Ste. Marie cost a lot: The latest estimate is about \$580 million -- and that's not easy to come by, even with congressional backing. Rep. Bart Stupak, a Menominee Democrat who represents the UP, will ask for \$125 million or so for the project in next year's budget, but even he acknowledged "we're not going to get all that."

This year's appropriation -- for \$17 million -- covers construction of the coffer dams and, later, some downstream dredging that will be needed. It comes behind about \$15 million spent on design work. In a perfect world, said John Niemiec, the project manager for the Corps, all the money would be there and the lock could get done in five years or so.

If that's not the case, the Corps will break the work into whatever pieces it can fund to build the 1,200-foot long, 110-foot wide, 32-foot deep lock (which only leaves about 2 1/2 feet of clearance on either side of the biggest vessels).



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

This photo illustration of the Soo Locks shows the planned overhaul of the shipping channel proposed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Two locks dating to the 1910s would be replaced -- but funding is an issue.

### THE SOO LOCKS

The Ojibway Indians and earliest European traders had to portage -- as in carry or drag -- their canoes around the St. Marys Rapids at Sault Ste. Marie, leading the Northwest Fur Co. to build the first navigation lock on the Canadian side of the river in 1797.

In 1852, Congress granted 750,000 acres to the Fairbanks Scale Co. to build locks for commerce. Two were completed and replaced by the current locks.

### Today at the Soo:

- The Davis Lock, built in 1918, is used only rarely.
- The Sabin Lock, from 1919, has been decommissioned. Both the Sabin and the Davis will be in the footprint of the new, larger lock being planned.
- The MacArthur Lock -- which is the closest to the U.S. side and still in use -- was built in 1943.
- The Poe Lock is the largest and handles the bulk of the traffic. It was built in 1968.

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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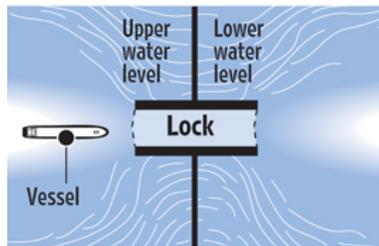
"This is like building a road that is 100 miles long," Niemiec said. "If you're given enough to build 5 miles, you build 5 miles. If you're given enough to build 10, you build 10."

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## Facts about locks

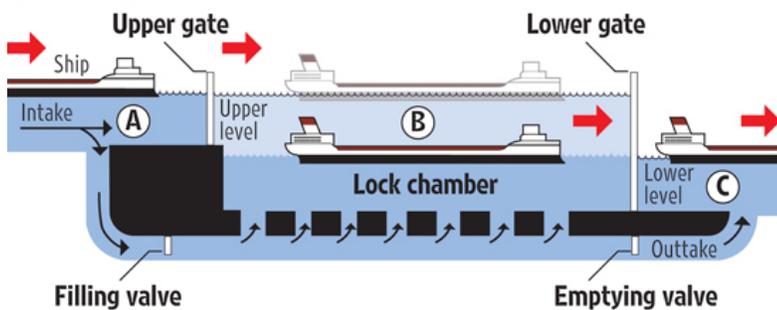


### WHAT A LOCK IS

A lock is an area of water that is raised or lowered to allow a vessel access from one water level to another. It is enclosed by gates, one at each end, to form a chamber. This is all done without pumps.

### HOW A LOCK WORKS

The diagram illustrates how a ship is lowered in a lock. A ship is raised by reversing the operation.



**A** With upper and lower gates closed, and with the emptying valve closed and the filling valve open, the lock chamber is filled to the upper level. The upper gates are then opened to allow the ship to enter the lock chamber.

**B** With the ship in the lock chamber, the upper and lower gates and the filling valve are closed. The emptying valve is opened to allow water to flow from the lock chamber to the lower level.

**C** With the water level in the lock chamber down to the lower level, the lower gates are opened, and the ship leaves the lock chamber. After this, the lock is readied for an upbound ship to come in and be lifted, or to be filled to lower another downbound ship.

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Sources: bartleby.com; haworth-village.org.uk; huron.lre.usace.army.mil/SOO/alock.html; MOSES HARRIS/ Detroit Free Press

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lost\_in\_the\_u\_p wrote:

Its about time that this government does something here for our people. They always in someother country,doing things that doen t help us. These locks are old and need to be bigger. Bigger is better right. Anyone in the Soo here thinks im right.

06/20/2009 11:02:52 p.m. EDT

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hwydog wrote:

In WWII, that was one of the most protected and important areas on the mainland. Needed to get all that iron from Minn. to make tanks, ships, etc.

06/15/2009 1:24:54 p.m. EDT

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oldtigerfan wrote:

"Poe Lock".....that's funny!  
06/14/2009 9:50:34 p.m. EDT

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Biggreyoldman wrote:

Years ago I saw the "Star" tabloid standing inline at Krogers. One of the headlines was "Chinnese Sub Reported in Lake Superior". The new lock will make it much easier for those subs to get into Lake Superior, along with the Loch Ness Monster.

06/14/2009 2:18:44 p.m. EDT

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