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Work on expanding Soo Locks is under way

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After more than two decades of planning, work finally began Tuesday on a new lock in Sault Ste. Marie, Mich.

Construction began on a pair of \$1.9 million coffer dams that will hold back the St. Marys River, making it possible to tackle the construction of the new lock.

For years, the Great Lakes maritime community has been calling for a new structure equivalent to the Poe Lock to be built at the Soo Locks complex. The Poe is the only lock large enough to handle the 40 biggest freighters moving cargo on the Great Lakes. Together, these large lakers represent 70 percent of the U.S.-flagged carrying capacity on the lakes, according to the Great Lakes Maritime Task Force.

Adolph Ojard, executive director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, considers the Soo Locks a critical link but also a pinch point.

"It's the most notable bottleneck for the upper four lakes that are the dominant customers for the port of Duluth," he said. "It's not unusual for ships to encounter delays in excess of several hours at the Soo, depending on how bad the traffic is."

If anything happened to force the Poe out of service, it could hobble shipping on the Great Lakes, and the consequences could be dire.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has gone so far as to call the Soo Locks "the single point of failure that could cripple Great Lakes shipping."

Now more than 40 years old, the Poe lock is starting to see more maintenance issues, Ojard said.

"The potential for a catastrophic failure has grown."

In a typical year, the Soo Locks handle more than 80 million tons of cargo including iron ore pellets to feed the nation's steel mills, coal to fuel electrical plants and grain destined for foreign markets. The lion's share of it comes from the Twin Ports.

Of course, this year has been anything but typical due to the ongoing recession, and the cargo flow through the Soo Locks has fallen off sharply as a result. But most expect the current season is an anomaly.

Midwest Energy Co. in Superior, which ships more than 20 million tons of coal down the lakes annually, is just one of the local docks that rely heavily on a functioning Poe Lock. Fred Shusterich, Midwest's president, was out of town Tuesday and could not be reached for comment. But he told the Detroit Free Press that 85 percent of the facility's business would be restricted without an operational Poe Lock at the Soo.

Constructing the coffer dams at the Soo is expected to provide employment for about 1,000 people.

Building the actual lock is expected to create about 15,000 jobs, both directly and indirectly, during the next decade.

But the project will need to attract an estimated \$580 million in funding to reach completion.

The construction of coffer dams this summer improves the outlook for the new lock to move forward, Ojard said. But he said: "It still will take a concerted effort by Great Lakes legislators to make this a reality."

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