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Construction launched in Soo for new Great Lakes shipping lock

Finished project to accommodate largest vessels

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SAULT STE. MARIE - A groundbreaking ceremony Tuesday marked the first step toward construction of a new Great Lakes shipping lock on the St. Marys River, which supporters have sought for more than two decades.



Associated Press file photo

Project planned: This photo shows the Soo Locks with the U.S. on the right and Canada on the left. Ground was broken Tuesday for a new Great Lakes shipping lock on the St. Marys River.

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The Soo Locks complex raises and lowers ships on the river linking Lake Superior and Lake Huron, forming a vital gateway for freighters hauling iron ore, coal and other raw materials to port cities such as Detroit and Cleveland. Last year, more than 8,460 vessels hauling a combined 81 million tons of freight passed through the locks.

But of four existing locks, just one - the Poe - can accommodate the Great Lakes' largest ships, which can be up to 1,000 feet long. Those super-sized ships carry more than 70 percent of the cargo that goes through the locks.

If the Poe were disabled, Midwestern industries such as steelmaking and electric power generation could be crippled, industry representatives say.

"It would pretty much shut down the lakes," said Glen Nekvasil, spokesman for the Lake Carriers Association, a trade group representing U.S.-flagged shippers.

A new Poe-sized lock would replace two others: the Sabin, which has been decommissioned, and the Davis, which is seldom used. The MacArthur, which can handle smaller vessels, will remain in service.

"We look forward to completing the project - hopefully ahead of schedule if funding allows us," said John Niemiec, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Congress authorized the new lock in 1986, but provided no construction money until placing \$17 million into this year's budget. That will pay for two

"coffer dams" - steel cells filled with rock that will restrain river waters as the lock is built.

Finishing the lock is expected to take 10 years and more than \$500 million, and officials acknowledged there is no guarantee of future funding.

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