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Rebuilding the Soo Locks
 An in-depth look at the work to refurbish one of Michigan's icons

How the locks work About the locks

How the locks work
 The Soo Locks play a key role in the shipping industry as they allow vessels to navigate an otherwise unpassable stretch. Here's a look at how they work:

1. Downstream vessels enter the lock from Lake Superior or about 100 feet above the lock. Lock gates are closed behind the vessel.

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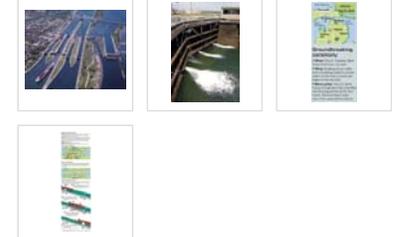
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On Tuesday, preparation will begin in Sault Ste. Marie for a backup lock that can accommodate the 40 largest freighters on the Great Lakes. (Marge Beaver / U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

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Monday, June 29, 2009

Today's focus

New lock holds key to shipping

Soo Lock project start shores up future of Great Lakes commerce

Mark Hornbeck / Detroit News Lansing Bureau

When ceremonial shovels bust into the sod on a sliver of land in the St. Mary's River in Sault Ste. Marie on Tuesday, the future of Great Lakes shipping and commerce stands to get a major boost.

A massive project to build a Soo Lock finally will be launched after more than two decades on the drawing boards.

Ground will be broken for two \$1.9 million "coffer dams." The dams will hold back the river so construction crews can start work on a big lock to complement the aging Poe -- the only one of three working locks at the Soo that can accommodate the 40 largest freighters on the Great Lakes that ship millions of tons of iron ore, Taconite and western coal to industries that turn the raw materials into steel and electricity.

Advertisement Building the retaining walls will put about 1,000 people to work, and the \$580 million lock project could create jobs for 15,000 workers directly and indirectly over the next 10 years, according to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Completion of the lock that connects Lakes Huron and Superior in the next decade will be a godsend to companies whose 1,000-foot vessels carry their cargo and employees' livelihoods. The Soo Locks, besides being a top state tourist attraction, are vital to Great Lakes shipping and the national economy.

"The new lock is really a safety net. If something happened to the Poe Lock, it would restrict 85 percent of our business," said Fred Shusterich, president of Superior, Wis.-based Midwest Energy Resources Co., which ships more than 20 million tons of coal a year through the Soo Locks to DTE Energy and other power

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companies.

The Poe has been closed occasionally due to faulty hydraulics, valves or gates, causing shipping delays and long lines of idled freighters. While shutdowns are rare and usually last only a few hours, the Poe was built 41 years ago, so a major failure is a growing concern, officials say. Between 70 percent and 80 percent of Great Lakes commerce flows through the big lock.

Adolph Ojard, executive director of the Duluth Seaway Port Authority, said routine delays at the Soo are usually minor, but "over a year, it adds up. Getting this project done certainly will be a benefit for the shippers."

Backup helps security also

A new lock would also indirectly address security issues, too, said John Niemiec, project manager for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in Detroit.

"If there was an act of terrorism on the Poe Lock, we'd still have a functional lock," he said. "And Taconite goes through there, which makes steel that supports military efforts, among other things."

Having a second large lock also would allow workers to do maintenance during the summer rather than winter, when the shipping season is on hold, said Gary Clow, chief lockmaster at the Soo.

More than 8,000 ships sail through the Soo Locks each year. The recession has cut into traffic this year, reducing freight totals through May by 45 percent to 9.9 million tons compared with the same period last year, according to the lockmaster.

In 2008, the locks served 8,461 vessels hauling about 81 million tons of cargo during the March-January shipping season. In an average year, about 11,000 ships toting 90 million tons of cargo will move through the locks, according to the Corps of Engineers.

There are four locks: the Poe, which handles most of the ship traffic and all of the larger freighters; the MacArthur, which can accommodate smaller ships; the Davis, which is rarely used; and the Sabin, which has been decommissioned. The new lock will replace the Davis and Sabin and will be located about a football field due north of the Poe.

The building of the Poe ushered in the era of 1,000-foot vessels on the Great Lakes. Before that, the longest ship that could use the locks was 730 feet.

Funding not complete

The Soo Locks are needed because the St. Mary's River, the only water link between Lake Superior and the other Great Lakes, which all are lower, falls 21 feet over rapids. The shipping canal enables ships to "lock through" the varying water levels, upbound or downbound.

Congress recognized the need for the Poe companion lock in 1986 and authorized the building of it but forked over only \$15 million before this year for design and planning. This year, \$17 million was allocated, leaving a whopping \$548 million needed to complete the huge project. Contracts for downstream channel excavation will be awarded later this year. The lock will be built in sections as money becomes available.

There are no guarantees the rest of the money will be forthcoming. But shipping interests are keeping their fingers crossed.

"The actual building of the coffer dams will take our third lock out of the picture, so I'm confident it will get done. It's a matter of when," chief lockmaster Clow said.

U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Menominee, said he's confident the lock project will be fully funded.

"Maybe not this year, but it will be built," he said. "There are no excuses anymore."

Stupak said the groundbreaking Tuesday is a solid sign the project will move forward.

"President Obama has shown he's willing to look at Great Lakes issues," he said.

The project suffered a setback when it wasn't approved for federal recovery act money in the spring.

"We were extremely disappointed the project didn't get the \$105 million in stimulus money that was asked for," said Glenn Nekvasil, spokesman for the Lake Carriers Association of Cleveland. "It seemed like the perfect project for that money."

The Army Corps' Niemiec said the lock construction fell short because stimulus money was earmarked for projects that could be quickly finished. This one will take about 10 years, he said.

Thousands of jobs

Direct hiring for construction and operation and spinoff jobs for suppliers, restaurants, grocery stores and other businesses could mean employment for 15,000 Michiganians, Niemiec said.

An Ohio company -- TAB Construction Co. of Canton -- was the low bidder for the coffer dam work and is expected to hire many workers from Michigan, Niemiec said.

Tuesday's groundbreaking ceremony is a special one for the Great Lakes shipping industry, Nekvasil said. "This is the beginning of a very important project," he said. "It will make sure cargo that moves on the lakes will continue to move."

He said a failure of the main Poe Lock at Sault Ste. Marie could be "the single point of failure that can cripple Great Lakes shipping."

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