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# Ceremony is first step toward new Soo Locks

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SAULT STE. MARIE (AP) — 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.

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, which oversees the Soo Locks.

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.

"We take a great deal of satisfaction in seeing actual construction start," said Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn, chairman of the Great Lakes Commission.

But finishing the lock is expected to take 10 years and more than \$500 million, and officials acknowledged there is no guarantee of future funding. The Army Corps has never considered the new lock a high enough priority to be included in its annual budget proposals. Congressional supporters inserted the money for the coffer dams.

Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., said he and Rep. Bart Stupak, D-Mich., pressed the case for the project in a meeting with corps officials after the groundbreaking.

"It's clearly a challenge to do this, but it's a challenge which we are confident can be met," Levin told The Associated Press in a telephone interview.

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