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### Corps makes ready for Lock gate project

By JACK STOREY/The Evening News

SAULT STE. MARIE - With less than a week left in the 2006 shipping season, the Corps of Engineers is making ready for winter work on the massive Poe Lock upper end gates.

Area Engineer Al Klein said the Poe Lock will likely close on time at or before midnight on Monday, the date set by regulation for the Soo Locks winter shutdown. Klein said, so far, no fleets have requested an extension to allow late passage of the Locks before the normal winter shutdown.

With no appreciable ice formed prior to the closure, the likelihood of weather delays appears minimal as shipping lines complete the last few trips to Lake Superior for the season. Shipping normally continues for several weeks after the Locks close on the lower Great Lakes, including alternate iron ore loading facilities at Escanaba on northern Lake Michigan.

As is usual for the last few weeks before the Poe Lock closes, Corps crews have been busy making ready for winter projects. This winter's repairs will include draining the Poe for the scheduled gate work. The MacArthur Lock closed for the season shortly after Christmas after handling a few late passages through the smaller lock.

This winter's work on the upper-end Poe gates will be done in climate controlled conditions, thanks to large new tent structure assembled alongside the Poe in recent weeks. The huge metal-framed fabric tent will be rolled into place over the gates and sealed to create, essentially, an indoor work space.

The work to be done, Klein said, includes inspection of the massive gate pintles that carry the weight of the huge steel doors. Pintle cracks discovered unexpectedly in the MacArthur Lock gates about five years ago caused a year-long delay in replacement as the massive hinge components were custom cast for the older lock gates.

This time around, Klein said replacement pintles are already on site in case the castings must be pulled off and replaced on the newer Poe gates.

Also on the agenda for the short winter repair season is work on the quoin blocks that form a nearly water-tight joint between the lock walls and the gates when the gates swing shut. The quoin blocks inset into the gate cavity in the walls extend from the concrete lock floor to the surface, a distance of about 50 feet.

While the Poe is emptied, crews will also "muck out" the lateral underwater tunnels used to fill and empty the Locks when in operation. The large cave-like tunnels accumulate considerable mud and debris from upriver during the Locks regular use.

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Klein said officials expect an extra helping of muck in the lateral tunnels after several years of dredging on the upper St. Mary's River stirred up sediment and other bottom materials that find their way into the Locks tunnels.

He said some winter work is also scheduled for the Poe Lock's lower-end operating gates during the short off-season period.

Whatever work is done deep within the concrete canyon of the Poe Lock must be completed by March, when preparations begin for a new shipping season on March 25.

Klein said the tent-structure, which resembles a similar portable tent used for repair of both the Poe and MacArthur Lock monolith joints several years ago, will be broken down and stored for future use. The portable tent, about two-thirds the length of a football field, has a useful life of about 10-15 years, he said.

While the Corps makes ready for off-season repair work on the Locks, the new Coast Guard icebreaker Mackinaw continues its training and familiarity cruises of the St. Mary's this week. Mackinaw recently completed its first buoy retrieval and replacement season and will apparently not be needed to break ice before the Locks close early next week.

Instead, Mackinaw and her crew are gaining familiarity with the St. Mary's and nearby waters of Whitefish Bay, normally Mackinaw's icebreaking "beat" when real ice forms.

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