

Waterways

A publication of the Upper Mississippi Waterway Association

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Calendar not weather determines when...

River season ends on the Upper

The Twin Cities news media have noted the closing of the shipping season on the Upper Mississippi River on December 2, with the departure of the ARTCO boat M/V Coral Dawn. One online outlet reported that the vessel, “tugged 12 barges filled with corn and soybeans down the river...” Coral Dawn had “first up” honors a couple years ago when she opened the season on the upper river in late March 2007.

Dick Lambert, Director of MNDOT’s Ports and Waterways section told reporters that the mild fall weather allowed a lengthened shipping season, which helped in moving commodities that had been delayed by a wet harvest season. The Army Corps of Engineers St. Paul District has now closed all of the locks in its jurisdiction for Winter maintenance. Lock and Dam 6, Trempealeau, Wis., and Lock and Dam 7, Dresbach, Minn., will be closed for bulkhead slot work and are scheduled to reopen March 9, 2010.

In coming weeks, Lambert will be sending out his annual tonnage survey to see how many tons of aggregates, sand, gravel, fertilizer, salt, cement, coal, and agricultural commodities were moved by water into and out of Minneapolis, St. Paul, Savage, Red Wing and Winona.

A look back

A year ago in *Waterways*, we noted some reasons for optimism in 2009 including then President-elect Barack Obama’s promise of, “Large direct government



Above: The M/V Coral Dawn heads downriver in an earlier picture.

spending on infrastructure” as part of a stimulus package.

Last month in this newsletter, we noted that more than \$70 million in funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act has been allocated to make crucial repairs at Lock and Dam 3 near Red Wing, Minn., beginning in January.

Work will correct several problems at the location, including an outdraft current that makes downbound entry to the lock tricky because the river wants to sweep tows and barges away from the lock and toward

Season to 3

From the Executive Director . . .

Fish Have Outwitted the Bureaucracy

One year ago in this column we talked about the Asian carp migration up the Mississippi River and their imminent threat to the Great Lakes.

A central issue then was that barge freight, barge operators and pleasure boaters could be damaged or electrocuted while crossing a \$2.2 million temporary electronic barrier intended to repel these finned marauders.

That article stated two electric barriers had been constructed: a 1-volt version in 2002 and a stronger 4-volt version completed in 2006, but not activated because of safety concerns. Following two years of testing and adjustments to make the barriers safe, along with a query by governors of the eight Great Lakes states, the federal government said they could not predict when – or even if – the barrier would be activated.

A Controversy with the Corps

At the time, there was also controversy between the Corps and members of an advisory panel that charged the Corps with creating ‘revisionist history’ in saying that the new barrier’s normal operating level was never intended to be any higher than 1-volt, notwithstanding that increasing the power to 4-volts was the major reason to build the new barrier in the first place.

Also at that time, a major Wisconsin newspaper report indicated that the Corps might activate the 1-volt version in November, 2008; but that it would not be operated at a higher voltage until tests are completed and reviewed by the Corps or Coast Guard – the health and safety of commercial and recreational users crossing the barriers being the number one concern.

Federal Decision Still Pending

According to the National Geographic web site, the state of Illinois petitioned the wildlife service to add Asian carp to the injurious wildlife list when it was learned that three species escaped from catfish farms into the Mississippi River. Aquaculturists lobbied against the listing. Four years later a decision is still pending. In the meantime, the U.S. and state governments are resorting to a costly and apparently ineffective electric barrier protection scheme.

Carp DNA Found

Fast forward to this past week when it was reported that Asian carp may have slipped through \$9 million worth of barriers; scientists detected DNA from silver and bighead carp in 32 water samples in two areas 10 miles above the electric fish barriers.

According to reports, it is not clear whether the carp breached or bypassed the two electric barriers. What is clear is one of the areas that tested positive for the fish is about 8 miles from Lake Michigan. Last year, it was speculated that carp were about 50 miles from that lake.

Navigation Lock is Last Hope

The last thing now standing between the carp and a \$7 billion sport fishing industry is a heavily used navigational lock that environmental groups insist be immediately closed, at least until it is determined where the invasive fish are, and how they got there.

Another suggested way to stop the carp’s northbound advance is to dam the canal that artificially connects the waters of the Mississippi River and Lake Michigan. But, as reports indicate, this would be a costly project considering the canal is the core of a local waterway system that handles about 20 million tons of cargo annually.

To add to these missteps, last week Corps officials announced that the newest barrier (the 4-volt version) needs to be shut down for maintenance for four or five days in early December. To maintain a fish-free zone during that downtime, the Corps plans to poison all fish in a six-mile stretch of the Illinois River between the barriers and the navigation lock to assure that no carp move north to Lake Michigan. The poisoning operation is expected to cost about \$1.5 million and involve 200 or more people.

Barge Industry is Concerned

A November 13 posting on *JOnline* (internet version of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* newspaper) reported that the barge industry didn’t learn of the pending poison program and the barrier’s December shut down until mid-November. “We’re not against doing it as an industry; we’re just against the timing.

Exec. Dir. to 3

Exec. Dir. from 2

We need more notification”, said AWO’s Lynn Muench. She said the industry needs a 30-day warning to reschedule shipments, noting that there are barges en route from the Gulf Coast that will be affected by the shutdown. She said each day a barge tow is stranded can cost more than \$10,000.

Scramble to Build Yet Another Barrier

In addition to poisoning the river, the Corps is reportedly scrambling to build a twin to the new barrier, making a total of three. The hope is the next time the barrier needs to be turned off for maintenance the backup will be available, hopefully negating the need for another multi-million dollar fish poisoning operation. According to the same report, the Corps is also looking at building an emergency berm to prevent the fish from riding floodwaters from the carp-infested Des Plaines River into the canal above the barrier.

As Carp Spread so do Ideas

After more than a decade of time and millions of dollars to construct dispersal barriers, it’s clear that fish have outwitted the bureaucracy. While some environmental groups endorse a program of sterilization as a means of controlling carp, others argue for lock shutdown, or for a permanent separation of the Great Lakes and Mississippi River watersheds.

Not many will argue against protecting the Great Lakes sport and commercial fishing industry reportedly valued at \$7 billion; nor will many argue against maintaining a waterway transportation system that carries tens of millions of tons of critical cargo through locks that lead into Lake Michigan.

However, as the mania that is often a partner in such discussions kicks in, the arguments will eventually polarize around the environmental, economic and food value of the Great Lakes versus the commercial and environmental value of moving freight between those lakes and the Mississippi River via barges.

While not attempting to predict the outcome of this Catch-22 decision, it seems safe to imagine that more river locks could be closed for longer periods of time, not because that would be the most effective solution, but because it would be seen as the most politically expedient one.

Season from 1

the gated dam. The Corps says there have been 11 incidents since 1968.

There’s also been long-standing worries about the low and weak embankments over on the Wisconsin side. As UMWA members have pointed out, an accident that closes the roller gates at the dam could cause overtopping of those embankments and potential loss of pool and significant environmental problems. If you’d like to be kept up to date on the work at Lock and Dam 3, you can get on the Corps’ email list at http://www.mvp.usace.army.mil/list_server/.

Funding timely

It’s apparently a good thing that the much needed work at Number 3 was locked in some time ago. Minnesota Rep. James Oberstar, who heads the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee is upset with the White House and its questions about whether or not such “shovel ready” projects provide a quick economic shot and create new jobs.

Oberstar said that President Obama was, “massively uniformed” when he raised the issue during a White House jobs summit. During a recent press conference, he presented a list of more than 9,500 infrastructure repair projects which could be started in less than 120 days from contract signing.

Oberstar says there is overwhelming support in the U.S. House for a bill to go ahead with those projects, even without support from the White House. In January of this year, Oberstar noted that he was unhappy with the compromises on the amount of money for infrastructure and the way it was to be disbursed. He said at the time that his proposals to distribute the money through the Corps of Engineers, the national passenger rail network and other programs was changed during negotiations on the Recovery Act. The more than \$70 million for Lock and Dam 3 work is part of \$375 million in stimulus money for the Mississippi River and tributaries in the original spending plan.

Welcome new readers

Waterways welcomes new readers who have joined the electronic mailing list with the completed merger of UMWA and RRA. Catch up on past issues online at www.umwa.us.