BAY MILLS NEWS

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Counties apply for emergency assistance

By Shannon Jones
Bay Mills News

SAULT STE. MARIE — Though the ice is beginning to thaw and spring-like weather is starting to make an appearance in Northern Michigan, the threat to water systems in the U.P. remains. The Senate Transportation Committee held a hearing on Tuesday, March 25 to hear firsthand the impact the freezing temps have had on U.P. utility systems.

The 2013-2014 winter put frost lines at as much as 10 feet for water systems designed for 8-foot depths. The City of Marquette suffered several frozen fire hydrants and broken water mains and has gone so far as to apply for emergency funding once already, only to be denied. The problem is widespread from Sault Ste. Marie to Ishpeming and most towns in between.

Not only are cities and townships finding themselves covering the costs of overtime to keep water running, some townships on "let run" also have to cover the costs of the water waste. Many fear the problems will only continue as the damage underground will not begin to reveal itself until it thaws. Frozen mains will cause water to rise to the surface once thawed.

Sault Ste. Marie Mayor Anthony Bosbous told the committee that despite constant maintenance of the system and more than $30 million in improvements since 1994, Mother Nature has taken her toll. Sault Ste. Marie has had several frozen water mains, which are likely to burst once all the frost is gone to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars in repair. The city is also facing claims from residents in regards to damages from thawing activities. The leaders of Luce County and Mackinac counties said they are having the same problems and the cost of overtime isn't something the cities have budgeted for. Mackinac Island has also experienced issues, but the full extent of damage won't likely be known until seasonal residents return to the island to open their homes.

Sen. Tom Casperson, R-Escanaba, visited Marquette earlier in March and told the panel he has seen the damage and was "stunned."

"I understand we have to follow procedures [in regards to funding], but there is a good chance this rolling problem is going to get worse," Casperson concluded.

Under the Michigan Emergency Management Act, for an emergency declaration to be recognized, the health and safety of the public must be at risk, not just a relief of financial burden.

Sen. Morris Hood, D-Detroit, said he believed people not having water or accessible fire hydrants was a clear public safety issue and wanted to see action taken immediately.

On March 27, Chippewa, Gogebic and Mackinac counties filed a local declaration of emergency with the state in hopes of receiving some kind of assistance. Thus far, damages are reported at $5.6 million in the U.P.; if a threshold of $13.7 million is reached, Michigan would be eligible for federal monies under the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The decision will fall on the hands of Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder.

In the meantime, residents under let run orders are reminded to keep the water running until informed otherwise.

Icy lakes made some towns, businesses winners or losers

By Nick Stanek
Capital News Service

SAULT STE. MARIE — The record-breaking ice on Lake Superior is bad news for the steel industry but not for tourism in some parts of the Upper Peninsula.

The Sault Ste. Marie locks opened Tuesday, March 25, as they do each year. But this was the first time since 2009 a boat didn't pass through the very same day.

The lack of boat traffic in 2009 was due to economic reasons. This year it is because of the ice, said Mark Gill, the U.S. Coast Guard director of vessel and trafficking services in Sault Ste. Marie.

No boats passed through the locks on opening day because they hadn't reached them yet. They were still trying to make their way across frozen Lake Superior. The delay could threaten jobs in industries that rely on transportation of raw materials across the Great Lakes, Gill said.

Those are industries that rely on iron ore that is shipped from Duluth, Minn., to steel mills in Detroit and areas along Lake Michigan. With the delay, workers at steel mills could be laid off, Gill said.

The limestone industry is another industry that relies on Great Lakes freighters. According to steel companies, limestone is used to remove impurities from molten iron and without it, removing impurities requires a more expensive process that could lead to job losses, Gill said.

A ship that recently passed through the St. Mary's River took eight days, said Linda Hoath, executive director of the Sault Area Convention and Visitors Bureau. It normally takes a ship 12 hours to go through the river.

Gill said the Coast Guard simply does not have enough resources to escort boats between the Great Lakes this winter. The U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards share 11 icebreakers in the Great Lakes Region, not enough to accommodate the extreme weather.

They are usually only used to take boats across St. Mary's River between Lake Superior and Lake Huron during the winter. This year however, icebreakers have had to escort ships the entire way across the frozen lakes.

Glen Nekvasil, vice president of the Lake Carriers Association, said the Coast Guard can't meet the demand of the industries.

This is an extremely difficult situation, he said, "We asked for more [federal] funding for icebreakers. They said we had adequate resources and now we don't and I'm not denying that this is a bad winter, but now we need them now."

Things are looking up.

Fortunately, warmer weather in the coming weeks could give the U.S. Coast Guard more flexibility, Gill said.

Although the iron industry is getting the cold shoulder, this year's winter is showing its softer side to tourism in some parts of the Upper Peninsula.

Tourism in Sault Ste. Marie during the first two months of this year went up 3 percent from last year, Hoath said.

Pat Black, director of the Marquette County Convention and Visitors Bureau, said tourism in Marquette is up about 5 percent from last year. "We keep track of it by counting hotel rooms," she said. "We are up from last year."

But Sault Ste. Marie and Marquette are exceptions, said Tom Nemacheck, executive director of the Upper Peninsula Travel & Recreation Association. Tourism in the Upper Peninsula on average has gone down this year.

"A lot of our visitors that normally come are from areas that are seeing subzero temperatures this year," he said. "No one in Lansing is going to say, 'Hey, let's go up north this weekend when it's so cold down there they don't want to leave their apartment."

The cities that are doing well usually have events or a recreational activity to attract people, he added.

This seems to be the case in Marquette since snow biking, a relatively new sport, became popular this year, Black said. "Biking is just a way of life up here and now people are starting to do it year round," she said. People are even taking their bikes onto Lake Superior.

About 400,000 people visit Sault Ste. Marie each year. Hoath said she thinks tourism in Sault Ste. Marie could rise as much as 5 percent this year.

"You have the rising water levels that are going to create more opportunities for fishing," she said, "and more boats are going to start coming through that people are going to want to see. It's going to be a really good year, I can feel it, trust me."

FAMILY FUN NIGHT — On Wednesday, April 2, the community turned out in full force for some pre-Easter fun at the Waishkey gym. The evening began with an Easter egg hunt with many other activities following, such as coloring and egg dyeing as shown above. The event was sponsored by Bay Mills Behavioral Health programs.
SHAR MYERS/BAY MILLS NEWS

Congress expands Great Lakes projects; 14 of them are planned for Michigan

By Qing Zhang
Capital News Service

LANSING — Everybody knows water flows, but not many people know that the sediment below it does too. That's why harbors need dredging, or excavating the gradually accumulated material on the bottom and transporting it elsewhere.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Detroit District planned eight dredging projects in Michigan and Wisconsin for 2014 at a cost of $13.2 million.

But Congress recently allocated an additional $17.8 million. That allows the district to include eight new projects and increase funding for four of the original projects.

In all, Congress allocated an additional $46.5 million in dredging funds for the entire Great Lakes.

The number of federal dredging projects fluctuates yearly depending on funding, said Jim Tapp, chief of the Corps' Technical Services Branch operations office. "There are always additional needs beyond those projects," he said.

Lynn Rose, a Detroit District public affairs officer, said a number of sites, including the Detroit River, Green Bay Harbor, St. Marys River, Grand Haven Harbor, Holland Harbor and the Milwaukee River, that have high-value commercial traffic, are on the funding list every year. Other harbors may not have that opportunity.

The most recent contract was awarded to King Company of Holland, to remove extra sediment from Grand Haven and Holland harbors.

The two projects will be completed by late May at a cost of $657,500. Sediment dredged from the two harbors will be put along the nearby shoreline.

Army Corps of Engineers Dredging Projects for 2014

State	Location	Cost
Michigan	St. Mary's River	$36,903,000
Michigan	Detroit River	$6,214,000
Michigan	Saginaw River	$ 4,537,000
Michigan	Holland Harbor	$1,800,000
Michigan	Monroe Harbor	$ 1,510,000
Michigan	Grand Haven Harbor	$988,000
Michigan	Black River, Port Huron	$1,000,000
Michigan	Cheboygan Harbor	$610,000
Michigan	Leland Harbor	$260,000
Michigan	St. Joseph Harbor	$ 1,500,000
Michigan*	Sebewaing Harbor	$1,725,000
Michigan*	Point Lookout Harbor	$1,654,000
Michigan*	Lexington Harbor	$400,000
Wisconsin/ Michigan	Menominee	$460,000

*Sebewaing, Point Lookout and Lexington are state funded

"The test result dictates where we will put the material," Tapp said.

Outer harbors are primarily made up of sand, which moves up and down the beaches and usually blocks off the entrance to the harbor. That kind of dredged material is clean and usually put on the beach.

The city manager of Grand Haven, Pat McGinnis, confirmed that the sandy sediment in Grand Haven Harbor was washed in from Lake Michigan. Putting the dredged material near shore is just to "put it back where it is from. There is no environmental concern," McGinnis said.

The sandy material can also help prevent nearby beach erosion, according to the Corps' report.

By comparison, inner harbors contain more material washed down from upland areas and the drainage basin. Such material "is more likely to be contaminated by the runoffs from farms and city street systems," which might include petroleum and animal waste, McGinnis said.

If dredged material is contaminated, Tapp said, it will be transported to a controlled place, usually a confined disposal facility, to make sure it does not harm the environment.

McGinnis said inner harbor sediment in Grand Haven is mixed with organic substances to create topsoil for use in landscaping.

Commercial harbors, which require at least 21 feet of depth, are important for national and regional economies, McGinnis said. That's where construction materials, like gravel and sand, are shipped in.

If the harbor isn't dredged, "then we couldn't get those materials," McGinnis said. "We couldn't build the roads. We couldn't run our power plant. We couldn't salt our roads."

The key for maintenance dredging, according to McGinnis, is consistency. "When you let up and you allow these materials to stockpile, it's really hard to catch up."

The federal Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund was set up with taxes from shipping and boating industries to support maintenance dredging activities.

With dredging, "you're never done because Mother Nature continues to bring these sediments back," McGinnis said.

Reminder to Bay Mills Tribal Members

A General Tribal Council meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, April 23 at 6 p.m. in the Horizons Conference Center. Please attend as a quorum is needed to conduct business.