

## Transportation by Anthony K. Wikrent

### Water shipping paralyzed

*Nature is presenting the bill for the failure to invest in infrastructure programs planned three decades ago.*

The severe cold of December, aftereffects of the 1988 drought, and cuts in the U.S. Coast Guard budget, have all combined to paralyze transportation on the Great Lakes and the Mississippi River system. Many of these problems would not be occurring if major infrastructure programs had been built as planned in the 1960s.

On Nov. 1, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers curtailed water flow on the Missouri, to build up reservoirs for spring planting, forcing an early end to navigation on that river. Shipping on the Mississippi was seriously hampered, since 70% of the water flowing past St. Louis comes from the Missouri.

Missouri River system reservoirs were left parched by the drought of 1988, and without the major canal and irrigation systems that were planned in the 1960s but never built, the snow melt and rainfall of 1989 were not enough to restore water levels. "We can only pray for rain," said Morris Larson, executive vice president of the Merchants Exchange of St. Louis. "All we can do is look back and say 1989 did not replenish what was taken by drought in 1988."

In the first week of December, three tows hit sand bars near St. Louis. On Dec. 20, the Coast Guard placed severe restrictions on Mississippi River traffic between St. Louis and Cairo, Illinois because of low water and accumulated ice hazards.

Almost 900 barges were trapped, and all access was blocked to the Illinois River, one of the richest grain tributaries in the world. There is so much traffic on the Illinois, that it usually remains open for traffic through-

out the entire year.

Continental Grain Company began asserting that it would refuse delivery of the blocked grain, since it had been forced to buy grain elsewhere to meet export commitments. But Continental's sophistry was attacked and exposed by members of the audience at an emergency meeting convened by the National Feed and Grain Association.

Warmer weather at the end of December melted some ice, allowing greater water flow, and by Jan. 3, there were seven tows with 49 barges waiting to transit the long-awaited new Lock and Dam 26 at Alton, Illinois.

The severe cold weather also caused an early formation of ice in the St. Mary's River at Sault Ste. Marie, forcing the Corps of Engineers on Dec. 28 to cease all operations of the vital Soo Locks connecting Lake Superior to Lake Huron and the East.

The closure sent some steel makers scrambling to assure a continued supply of iron ore and limestone. U.S. flag carriers had projected moving 1.6 million tons of iron ore through the Soo Locks between Dec. 29, 1989 and Jan. 15, 1990. By comparison, more than 5.2 million tons of cargo passed through the Soo Locks between Dec. 16, 1988 and Jan. 15, 1989—including 4.2 million tons of iron ore, enough to make steel for 3.5 million automobiles.

The Lake Carriers Association stated that some of the 1.6 million tons could have been moved before Dec. 29, if repairs to the Coast Guard icebreaker *Mackinaw* had been completed on time, and been available to keep navigation tracks open. Delays in re-

ceiving parts for repairing an unexpected problem with the *Mackinaw's* main propeller shaft kept the icebreaker laid up in a Sturgeon Bay, Wisconsin shipyard for at least another week and a half.

The 1988 budget cuts had forced the Coast Guard to announce plans to retire the 45-year-old *Mackinaw*, leaving only five smaller, and less capable, ice-breaking tugs on the Great Lakes, but a mobilization by the LCA in Congress assured continued funding for the *Mackinaw*.

The premature freeze forced one iron ore ship carrying 50,000 tons for Inland Steel to dock for the winter in a Lake Superior port.

Inland spokesman Bob Lefley noted however, that Inland had already stockpiled most of the iron ore it planned to use during the remainder of the winter, and expected no problems with the final Lake Michigan run of three other Inland ships from Escanaba, Michigan to production facilities in Chicago.

USX was reported to be purchasing iron ore from third sources at Escanaba, since it was unable to ship ore from its Mesabi Range operations via Lake Superior and the Soo Locks. USX spokesman George Kuebler stated that USX had already stockpiled most of the iron ore it planned to use, but admitted that USX was planning to ship "a large amount" of ore by railroad from Minnesota to its production facilities in Gary, Indiana, which USX had not done "for six or seven years, at least."

Spokesmen for other steel companies said that their companies had no plans for shipping ore by rail, because rail shipment was so much more expensive than water shipping. George Ryan, president of the Lake Carriers Association, noted that several smaller companies may be seriously hurt by a lack of ore in February and March.