Icy sections of St. Marys River affecting shipping, residents

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Marcy Misner/Amy

**Ice Breaking challenges—FEATURE—**

(length4:21)

You may not have seen any robins in your yard yet, but if you’ve had a chance to look out on the Great Lakes, you may see that some ships are starting to move. It’s another sign of spring.

The green light is on for the 2014 shipping season and the industry is ready to go. Now it’s up to a handful of experts to orchestrate the dance among refineries, ships, city residents who need fuel, and island residents who don’t want to be marooned until spring is over.

Marcy Misner reports.

Right now, you could walk from Beaver Island, in the northern part of Lake Michigan, for some 50 miles on ice before finding cracks.

**(17:29)If you look at Lake Superior, that’s more ice than we’ve ever dealt with in our 35-year history of managing icebreaking.**

That’s Mark Gill. He’s the director of vessel traffic for the US Coast Guard in Sault Ste. Marie. He’s a high-octane kind of conductor who found himself nursing along a slow close to the shipping season this year.

The early onset of ice interfered with the last-ditch efforts to get iron ore and the like to refineries for the winter.

**(08)When we closed off in January, we’ve got a lot of ore that was needed, we didn’t get to market because literally what was taking normally 3,4 days was taking 10-12 days to get done.**

Gill says now steel facilities in the Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit areas are desperate for iron ore.

**So desperate that ships are wanting to come out early to start trading early. So we have right now, 5 service requests or 5 ships that are asking for our help to get started.**

Gill says a freighter in Duluth has been cooling its heels for the last two months. It’s ready for the green light, but until the lake “gives up its ice” shippers have no choice but to wait.

The president of the Lake Carriers’ Association says no steel mills are reported to be in danger of shutdown. But freighters are in high demand right now.

Once again, Mark Gill -

**Right now I can tell you that Green Bay; two icebreakers needed. Southern Lake Michigan, an icebreaker needed, two icebreakers for the Straits, 6 icebreakers needed for the St. Marys River, two icebreakers for eastern Superior, at least two icebreakers for western Superior.**

**So we have way more ice than we have icebreakers, so something has to give, and it’s not the icebreakers because we can’t be everywhere at once.**

So industry is having to make a choice this year: get their iron ore to an ice-free port by rail, or wait.

**That’s not an easy choice. They’ve got 11 ships in Lake Superior that have been waiting to come out. They need to move coal, they need to move iron ore. They need to move grain out of Thunder Bay, Ontario. All of those commodities are very important to those ports. How do you tell the port of Duluth that you’re not going to get service until April? Meanwhile we’re going to try and continue to open up these waterways.**

The ice is so thick and extends so far this year, Gill says trips are likely to take three-times as long as usual. It takes time to bust through 50 miles of ice that’s 4 feet thick.

There are a lot of people clamoring for icebreaking services and all the requests go right to Gill.

Ships are waiting to get out on the lakes, refineries are waiting for the ships to arrive, residents in cities like in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario are waiting for the ships to bring gasoline for cars and heating fuel for their homes. And then there are a few hundred people on Sugar Island in Chippewa County. They’re kind of hoping the ships don’t move at all. When the ships come through, residents can find themselves marooned by the cleaved ice.

**The question comes, what do we do when we have competing interests for icebreaking? Sugar Islanders, would, the 3 or 400 residents who live there year-round would say, hey, Coast Guard, just don’t bring the tanker up. but then the community of sault Ontario, do you tell them you don’t get heating oil, fuel oil? so something has to give.**

There’s a hierarchy the Coast Guard follows. Unfortunately for Sugar Islanders, they are toward the bottom. Community service requests come after urgent vessel requests and search and rescue missions.

Gill understands this can be hard for residents to hear.

**( 24:05) We understand their situation. we understand there are a bunch of people over there who have to get over here to get to work, and come back and forth to get groceries and food and water. so the coast guard is committed to attempting to make sure their crossing can stay open. but there’s no guarantee. there’s no way we can keep ferry service open, because let’s face it, Mother Nature has said you know what, until I’m ready to get rid of this, it’s not going anywhere.**

So while shippers, refineries, city dwellers and island residents all wait for Mother Nature to give up her ice, the man who orchestrates travel across the lakes is trying to come as close as he can to pleasing all of the people all of the time. And all of the complications are because of a ridiculous amount of ice on the lakes this year.

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**ANCHOR TAG: The president of the lake carriers association says this winter is as bad as what he saw in 1993 to 94. In that year, he said the Coast Guard was icebreaking until May 18 and he expects this winter could be similar.**

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**WEB VERSION**

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Gill said now steel facilities in the Chicago, Cleveland and Detroit areas are desperate for iron ore.

“So desperate that ships are wanting to come out early to start trading early. So we have right now, 5 service requests or 5 ships that are asking for our help to get started,” he explained.

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The president of the Lake Carriers’ Association says no steel mills are reported to be in danger of shutdown. But freighters are in high demand right now.

“Right now I can tell you that Green Bay; two icebreakers needed. Southern Lake Michigan, an icebreaker needed, two icebreakers for the Straits, 6 icebreakers needed for the St. Marys River, two icebreakers for eastern Superior, at least two icebreakers for western Superior, and if you do the math, that does not equal 6.

So we have way more ice than we have icebreakers, so something has to give, and it’s not the icebreakers because we can’t be everywhere at once,” Gill said.

Six icebreakers are assigned to his area, while Gills’ counterpart down in Detroit has 5 icebreakers assigned to that area of the lakes. The shallower Lake Erie thaws more quickly and Gill is counting on those southern icebreakers to come up and help once they’ve cleared their areas.

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“That’s not an easy choice. They’ve got 11 ships in Lake Superior that have been waiting to come out. They need to move coal, they need to move iron ore. They need to move grain out of Thunder Bay, Ontario. All of those commodities are very important to those ports. How do you tell the port of Duluth that you’re not going to get service until April? Meanwhile we’re going to try and continue to open up these waterways,” Gill said.

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