

Lock Mess

by Ben Myers, Staff Writer

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Barge and tugboat shipments from New Orleans to Mobile, Ala., can take up to three days, and the better part of one those days is often spent doing nothing, said Clark Todd, vice president of Harahan-based Blessey Marine Services.

That's because the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Lock, the only way for vessels to pass through New Orleans along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, is decades overdue for a replacement. The lock is too narrow for modern barge configurations, which require them to be separated before entering the lock, resulting in extreme delays that sometimes last for days.

"It's becoming an absolute nightmare," Todd said.

But a two-day delay is nowhere near the worst-case scenario. The lock could shut down completely at any time, which would add another week to the New Orleans-Mobile trip. The only alternative is the Tennessee River, Todd said, which could cause his customers to consider other forms of transport.

"I think they would absolutely be punching the calculators," to figure out how much money they could save via an alternate route, he said.

The typical lifespan for a lock is 50 years, said Victor Landry, who oversees lock operations for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The Inner Harbor lock, completed in 1923, still functions with many of its original parts, and a major malfunction could halt maritime commerce between Florida and Texas.

"Let's say a ship comes to lock through, and there's some catastrophic accident where the ship damages one of the gates. It would basically be frozen and everything would shut down," Landry said.

Congress initially authorized a replacement lock in 1956 but did not appropriate money for the project until 2001. Since then, more than \$91 million has been appropriated for



A barge passes through the Inner Harbor Navigation Canal Lock, the only way vessels can pass through New Orleans on the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway.
(Photo by Frank Aymami)



a project with a total cost exceeding \$770 million. At that rate, it could be 2040 before the new lock is complete, said Cornell Martin, CEO of the Waterways Council, a public policy organization based in Arlington, Va.

The federal government splits the cost of navigational projects with industrial waterway users, whose contributions come in the form of a 20-cent-per-gallon fuel tax. Tax proceeds are deposited into the

Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which has been depleted since the early part of the decade, Martin said.

"Every penny that goes in pretty much comes out almost immediately," Martin said.

That results in stop-start appropriations and construction delays, he added.

The council is promoting a new plan that would increase the fuel tax and place all responsibility for dams with the federal government. The plan would increase congressional appropriations, Martin said, and could shave more than 10 years off the new lock's construction time.

In any case, a major shutdown will almost certainly occur before a new lock is completed. The lock chamber gradually fills with water over time, which requires the corps to shut down the lock for "dewatering" every 15 years — that's if there are no hurricanes. The last dewatering, in 2008, was planned to last 60 days. Then came hurricanes Gustav and Ike.

"We wound up dewatering it three times," Landry said.

But funding is not the only reason for construction delays. Construction on the new lock was halted in 2006 when a federal judge found that the corps' environmental planning did not meet legal requirements.

Plaintiffs in that suit, a coalition of neighborhood and environmental groups, claim the corps continues to violate the Clean Water Act by failing to consider alternatives that are less harmful to the environment. Specifically, they say a shallow-draft lock would reduce the amount of dredged material that ends up in the wetlands.

The Port of New Orleans, in a written statement, said its tenants along the Industrial Canal require deepwater facilities.

But another lawsuit is in the works, according to a court notice filed in January by the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic, which is representing the plaintiffs.

"If you want to get something done as soon as possible, the easiest way to do that is to comply with the letter of the law all the way through," said Adam Babich, the clinic's director. •