



September 29, 2009

## Broken Markland lock could delay barge traffic for months

*By James Bruggers*

*jbruggers@courier-journal.com*

Barge traffic on the Ohio River could be delayed for months due to a gate breaking off at the Markland Locks and Dam Sunday, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officials said Tuesday.

Shipments through the locks upstream from Louisville amount to more than 50 million tons of commodities annually, including coal, petroleum and steel, according to the Waterways Council Inc., an industry group of businesses dependent on the nation's inland waterways.

"It will affect the entire inland waterways system," said Cornel Martin, president of the council.

Coal makes up the largest share of the cargo moving through the locks. The coal is carried from mines in Kentucky, West Virginia and elsewhere to power plants.

However, Louisville Gas & Electric Co. doesn't expect any disruptions. The utility's plants and coal suppliers are downriver from Markland and don't rely on the locks, spokeswoman Chris Whelan said.

The Waterways Council predicted the failure in a February 2008 report on Markland Locks and Dam, located a few miles downstream from Warsaw. "The risk is high that a failure of the lock gates will occur, forcing traffic through the auxiliary lock for an extended period, causing huge delays and costs to the towing industry."

The report documented a history of severe cracking and corrosion dating to at least 1994. Repairs were made, but the lock has since been under much closer scrutiny, the report said.

One of two gates on the down-river side of the main, 1,200-foot long lock chamber fell off on Sunday and is lying on the bottom of the lock, said Carol Labashosky, a Louisville-based corps spokeswoman. The other needs to be stabilized to make sure it also doesn't fall off, she said.

Until the gates can be fixed or replaced, barge traffic will have to use an auxiliary lock that's only half as long, Labashosky said. That means tows will need to be separated in two before they pass through the Markland facility, and then reassembled afterwards, Labashosky said.

A typical tow is a little less than 1,200 feet long and comprised of as many as 15 barges, she said. Now, just six to eight barges will be able to pass through Markland at a time.

The gates on the auxiliary lock also were showing signs of fatigue and cracking, the Waterways Council's 2008 report said. Labashosky said the corps will have to be careful not to overstress the smaller lock even as its use increases.

But the corps' first order of business will be to stabilize the precariously hinged gate on the main lock chamber, she said. It also must move the fallen gate from the bottom of the lock so a bulkhead can be put in place and the lock drained.

Then corps officials will need to decide whether they can salvage the current gates, and if so, how

long that might take.

Corps officials had intended to replace the lock's 50-year-old gates within a year, Labashosky said. She said she was not sure whether that schedule could be accelerated.

Barge industry representatives said the mishap, occurring about a week before the busy grain-shipping season, is likely to cause some slowdown in river traffic. But they said it's too early to know how serious that will be.

"We do expect it to potentially cause delays, and we have notified our customers of the potential delays," said Kim Durbin, spokeswoman for Jeffersonville, Ind.-based American Commercial Lines. "In terms of how long the delays will be, there's no way for us to specify that."

The CQ Princess was in the lock when the gate broke, headed from Louisville to the Belterra casino with a crew of four aboard.

"We heard one loud bang, and then heard the lock operator (on the radio) say, 'What was that?' About that moment, a swell formed ... that tossed us back into the wall," said Paul Masterson, captain of the yacht.

After two more loud noises, it became clear the gates had broken, and the water inside the lock became more turbulent, he said. As things settled down, the crew was able to tie the boat up.

After about two hours, the yacht was allowed to go back out the way it came in.

"It was a scary ride," Masterson said, adding that he feels fortunate that the yacht suffered only minor damage. He said it won't be just the commercial barge traffic that will be delayed until the gates are fixed or replaced. Since barges typically go to the front of the line, he said getting through the auxiliary lock in a private pleasure boat now will be very difficult.

The Markland facility, 26.5 miles upstream from Madison, Ind., helps river traffic navigate a 35-foot difference between upper and lower pools. The locks were placed in operation in May 1959, according to the corps web site.

Martin said the industry has been anticipating the new gates to be delivered from their manufacturer next year, and placed in service in 2011. "They need to try to expedite that now," he said.

In the meantime, he said, the corps needs to try to get the broken gates working.

Reporter Patrick Howington contributed to this report. Reporter James Bruggers can be reached at (502) 582-4645.

---