HOW ARE YOU INVOLVED?

System stakeholders urged to engage

Over the last year, our organization worked closely with Martin Associates of Lancaster, Pennsylvania to produce an infrastructure investment survey of the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway system. To begin that effort, a master list of 628 system stakeholders was compiled. This list guided the survey process and included vessel operators, port authorities, private terminals, shippers, pilots, dredging contractors, etc.

Reviewing the list, I was struck by the large number of American companies who apparently rely on the waterway for economic gain, but play no active role in regional efforts to ensure its success. Without naming names, I ask each of you to consider—how are you involved?

The Great Lakes/St. Lawrence Seaway system is under constant threat. The role call of challenges is familiar to many of you. Federal and state agencies have deployed a patchwork of ballast discharge rules that threaten vessel operations. While most of these are harmonized, some still are not. Michigan regulations continue to obstruct export activity at the state's ports. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ballast rules disadvantage Canadian operators and future Canadian regulations may disadvantage U.S. operators.

Many Great Lakes ports remain choked with sand and silt from an underfunded federal harbor maintenance program. Dredge material disposal is increasingly expensive and problematic, particularly in Lake Erie where the State of Ohio is now resisting open lake disposal.

Our lock infrastructure is aging and in need of constant maintenance. Massive capital upgrades to the region's locks are underway, but not yet completed. Funds to overhaul the Poe Lock have slowed to a trickle and the project is slipping behind schedule. Barge transportation to southern Lake Michigan ports is under threat as activists continue to champion closure of the Chicago Area Waterway System. Last winter's record ice conditions highlighted the vulnerability of the navigation system in an era of climate change. Despite heroic efforts by the U.S. and Canadian Coast Guards, commerce slowed to a crawl. Vessel operators have called for construction of an additional heavy icebreaker—which will be a heavy lift in Congress.

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This litany of challenges makes it painfully clear—navigation is dependent on government. No matter how much you may believe in free enterprise, capitalism, private competition and marketplace solutions, the maritime industry operates on public waterways, enhanced by public infrastructure, constructed, operated and maintained with public tax dollars and is regulated by public agencies according to laws enacted by public officials. The Great Lakes maritime industry—and its stakeholders-have no choice but to actively engage government.

Great Lakes/Seaway government relations work is carried out by an unfortunately modest cadre of stakeholders. On the U.S. side efforts are dominated by the Lake Carriers' Association (LCA) and the American Great Lakes Ports Association (AGLPA), each acting on behalf of their members. These members, however, represent a small fraction of system stakeholders. The LCA represents 13 companies; AGLPA represents 16 ports. To strengthen our collective voice, the Great Lakes Maritime Task Force (GLMTF) was founded in 1992 to serve as a broad-based industry advocacy coalition. With a membership of 85, the GLMTF includes carriers, ports, labor, shippers, pilots, shipyards and many other system stakeholders. Despite its size, many companies are still not participating.

Let's dissect the numbers. Of the 628 entities identified in the survey, 368 were in the United States. Of those, five were federal agencies. Of the remaining 363 facilities, some are owned by the same parent organization. After adjusting for these, the list of corporate stakeholders includes 290 names. As stated earlier, our largest advocacy coalition has a membership of 85. The number of uninvolved companies is huge and troubling. Again, not to name names, but consider that no grain-related stakeholder is involved in our system advocacy efforts. Similarly, no stakeholder from the Saginaw/Bay City, Michigan area is involved. Only one tug operator is involved.

My goal is not to point fingers, but rather, to encourage everyone to get involved. I have no doubt that each company looks after its own interests, but no company is an island. The navigation system is an interconnected network and every stakeholder relies on the viability of the whole.

If you are not currently part of system advocacy efforts, please reach out to any of our trade associations. The Great Lakes Maritime Task Force welcomes new members. Membership information can be found at: www.glmtf.org. Likewise, the American Great Lakes Ports Association is open to any American stakeholder. I urge you to email me (fisher@greatlakesports.org) for more information.

In our democracy, there is strength in numbers, and as we work on public policy issues, the more voices we can rally, the better. ■

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