AMERICAN
GREAT LAKES PORTS
ASSOCIATION

2026 Position Paper

IMPROVE GREAT LAKES ICE BREAKING

Summary:

Heavy ice threatens the reliability of the Great Lakes–St. Lawrence Seaway and intra-lake transportation early and late in the navigation season. To ensure safe and reliable navigation, the U.S. Coast Guard conducts icebreaking operations on the Great Lakes in coordination with the Canadian Coast Guard. The U.S. Coast Guard's Great Lakes icebreaking fleet consists of nine primary vessels: six 140-foot icebreaking tugs ("140s"), two buoy tenders with limited icebreaking capability, and the heavy icebreaking cutter Mackinaw.

During the most recent winter navigation season, severe and persistent ice conditions disrupted vessel movements, delayed cargoes, and strained existing icebreaking assets. These conditions underscored the operational limits of the current fleet and reinforced the need for additional heavy icebreaking capacity and improved harbor-level icebreaking capability to support commercial navigation.

While icebreaking on the Great Lakes is a shared U.S.–Canadian responsibility governed by binational agreements, the United States must ensure that sufficient domestic icebreaking capacity is available to maintain navigation reliability regardless of Canadian asset availability or mission prioritization, which is often focused elsewhere.

Position:

To ensure reliable winter navigation on the Great Lakes, Congress should continue to advance the construction of a new heavy Great Lakes icebreaker to supplement and eventually replace existing heavy icebreaking capacity. To keep this project moving forward, Congress should include a minimum of $250 million in the FY2027 Homeland Security Appropriations bill to begin construction of a new heavy Great Lakes icebreaker or $650 million to fully fund the project.

In addition, Congress should support targeted investments to retrofit and modernize existing icebreaking assets and associated harbor infrastructure, including facilities and modifications that improve the effectiveness of the 140s and buoy tenders that perform critical harbor and near-shore icebreaking functions.

AGLPA further urges the Administration to engage Canada to meet its responsibilities under the binational icebreaking framework. However, regardless of binational coordination outcomes, the United States must

retain sufficient icebreaking capability to keep Great Lakes commerce moving during severe winter conditions.

Additional Background:

The U.S. Coast Guard's icebreaking mission was established in 1936 by Executive Order 7521, which tasked the agency with "keeping open to navigation by means of icebreaking operations, in so far as practicable and as the exigencies may require, channels and harbors in accordance with the reasonable demands of commerce." In carrying out this mission, the U.S. Coast Guard works in coordination with the Canadian Coast Guard.

In 1979, the two agencies collectively operated approximately 20 icebreaking vessels to maintain maritime commerce during the cold-weather months of the shipping season. Today, the U.S. Coast Guard's core Great Lakes icebreaking fleet consists of nine primary vessels, significantly reducing available capacity. This decline has negatively affected commerce and system reliability. Recent winters, including the most recent season, have featured severe and persistent ice conditions, which have delayed shipping, compressed operating windows, and increased safety risks for vessels and their crews.

While icebreaking on the Great Lakes is intended to be a shared binational responsibility, differences in investment levels and mission focus have placed a disproportionate burden on U.S. assets. Canadian icebreaking support for the Great Lakes is largely provided by multi-mission vessels that, due to lack of investment and choice, limit their availability during periods of heavy ice. As a result, shortfalls in binational capacity have further strained an already limited domestic U.S. fleet.

The lack of adequate icebreaking service affects the region's manufacturers, mining industry, steel industry, utilities, agricultural exporters, and related labor. Accordingly, in 2015, Congress authorized the construction of a new heavy icebreaker for the Great Lakes and has appropriated $20 million for design work and an additional $20 million for acquisition and construction activities. A June 2020 Coast Guard report to Congress estimated that the new vessel would cost approximately $350 million, depending on final design and capabilities.

Most recently, during consideration of FY2026 Homeland Security appropriations, the House included report language recognizing the importance of Great Lakes icebreaking capacity and continued progress toward a new Great Lakes icebreaker.