
James L. Oberstar

H.R. _____, THE GREAT LAKES ICEBREAKER REPLACEMENT ACT

HON. JAMES L. OBERSTAR

OF MINNESOTA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

March 26, 2009

Madam Speaker, I today introduce H.R. _____, the “Great Lakes Icebreaker Replacement Act”. U.S. industries in the heartland of the United States are totally dependent on Great Lakes icebreakers to keep them supplied with raw materials during the winter months. Without them, steel mills would shut down for want of iron ore and electrical generation would halt for want of the coal necessary to power generators. People could not just lose their jobs – but their lives.

During the 2006-2007 winter season, transportation of 10,400,000 tons of iron ore on the Great Lakes supported 100,000 jobs at Minnesota and Michigan iron ore mines and lower Lakes steel mills and 300,000 jobs at supplier industries. That same winter, 6,400,000 tons of coal were shipped on the Great Lakes to keep the region supplied with electricity. However, we don’t have the icebreaking capacity on the Great Lakes that we have had historically. During the spring of 2008, U.S.-flag vessels operating on the Great Lakes suffered more than \$1.3 million in damages to their hulls because the Coast Guard did not have sufficient assets to keep the shipping lanes open.

People who are not from the Great Lakes region probably do not realize that there is ice on the Lakes and their interconnecting channels from early December until April. Some years, the Coast Guard has been breaking ice in the St. Mary's river until mid-May. Think of these icebreakers as the snow plows for Great Lakes shipping. It is the Federal Government's responsibility to keep these marine highways open so the needs of the public can be met.

In 2006, the Coast Guard took delivery of the new icebreaker MACKINAW. Unlike the old MACKINAW, this vessel is a combined buoytender-icebreaker so that it can execute Coast Guard missions year-round. Five of the Coast Guard's icebreakers on the Lakes are close to the end of their useful lives. Further, the buoytenders on the Lakes are having difficulty breaking ice of the thickness that is commonly found on the Lakes.

The \$153 million authorized in H.R. ____ authorizes the funding to build a sister ship to the MACKINAW. The design of the MACKINAW is proven and the vessel has shown that is it up to the job of breaking ice on the Lakes during the winter and tending buoys during the spring, summer and fall months. Not only will this funding ensure that our nation's vital industries are supplied during the winter – construction of this icebreaker will create jobs at U.S. shipyards and the related supplier industries at a time when job creation is so vital to an economy losing some 600,000 jobs per month.

For all of these reasons, it is critically important that we provide the Coast Guard with the resources necessary to build a replacement icebreaker for the Great Lakes region.