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Key St. Marys River restoration project moving forward

Sault Ste. Marie, Mich. – After decades of planning by local, state and federal partners, the Little Rapids restoration project is closer to bringing better habitat for sport fish and better access for anglers in the St. Marys River. The project will move the river one step closer to being formally removed from the list of Great Lakes Areas of Concern. The Chippewa County Road Commission announced today that their board has selected Payne & Dolan Inc. to start construction in 2016 on a 625-foot bridge to replace two failing culverts and improve the roadway along the existing Sugar Island causeway.

Great Lakes Commission Acting Chair Jon Allan, director of the Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality Office of the Great Lakes, said: “Little Rapids restoration is very exciting because it will result in over 50 acres of improved sport fish spawning habitat in a world-class fishery. The State of Michigan appreciates both the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative funding that makes the project possible and the efforts of highly motivated partnering individuals and organizations, representing federal, state, county, tribal, academic and non-profit interests.”

The new bridge will improve the existing road, create a pedestrian walkway and access for fishing, re-establish more natural water flow, and create 50-70 acres of habitat for native fish, including valuable sport fish species such as rainbow trout, salmon, walleye and whitefish. The project culminates more than two decades of restoration work on the St. Marys River and is expected to be the final action needed to formally remove the U.S. side of the river from the list of heavily degraded Areas of Concern designated under the Great Lakes Water Quality Agreement with Canada.

Throughout the project’s construction the Road Commission will maintain two lanes of traffic and minimize impacts on local users. A public meeting will be held later this summer with Payne & Dolan Inc. as an introduction to the community and opportunity to outline the specifics of the approved design.

“The Road Commission is grateful for the opportunity to improve this roadway, create safer conditions for pedestrians and drivers, and support our community’s longstanding efforts to restore the health of the St. Marys River,” says Chippewa County Road Commission Board Chairman Richard Timmer.

The project is being funded under the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative (GLRI), a multiyear program that is addressing the biggest threats to the health of the Great Lakes.

According to Congressman Dan Benishek, a GLRI supporter and member of the House Great Lakes Task Force: “I have consistently fought to ensure that the Great Lakes Restoration Initiative is fully funded. That’s because

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Great Lakes Commission

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dollars to that program end up right here in our community helping projects like the impressive effort to restore the health of the St. Marys River, which is key to transportation, fishing and recreation in northern Michigan.”

Approximately \$9 million from the GLRI is being provided for the project through a regional partnership between the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Great Lakes Commission (GLC). The Chippewa County Road Commission, which owns and maintains the causeway, is administering the project, which will also complete an ongoing paving project of 1-1/2 Mile Road. The majority of funding will be used for local construction materials, labor and contractors.

Planning for the project began in the early 1990s when the Soo Area Sportsmen’s Club recognized the opportunity to strengthen sportfish populations by improving fish spawning and nursery habitat in the Little Rapids area. The restoration project was later identified as a priority by the St. Marys River Binational Public Advisory Council (BPAC), the group guiding the river’s overall cleanup program.

“People who enjoy fishing and the river in general have been very interested in seeing this project come to fruition,” said Bud Willis, president of the Soo Area Sportsmen’s Club. “We’re excited at the prospect of more water flowing through the rapids to provide better fish habitat and more spawning grounds for some of the Great Lakes’ most prized sportfish, and we’re also glad to see that public access has been taken into consideration as this project has been planned.”

Recreational anglers spend an estimated \$2.5 billion annually in Michigan, with at least \$7 million generated annually by fishing on the St. Marys River. “NOAA is pleased to support the incredible work taking place in Areas of Concern around the Great Lakes through this partnership,” said Julie Sims, regional coordinator for NOAA’s Restoration Center. “The St. Marys River is essential to the eastern Upper Peninsula as both an ecological and economic resource.”

Other partners assisting with the project include the Eastern Upper Peninsula Regional Planning and Development Commission, Lake Superior State University, Chippewa Ottawa Resource Authority, Michigan departments of Environmental Quality and Natural Resources, and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Kristina Denison, U.S. chair of the St. Marys River Binational Public Advisory Council, said “the BPAC has been guiding the St. Marys River cleanup process for over two decades and is gratified with the tremendous progress that has been made. Restoring the Little Rapids is a significant milestone to our work in the St. Marys River Area of Concern.”

The St. Marys River was designated as a binational Area of Concern in 1987 due to pollution and habitat alteration. Over nearly three decades, federal, state and local partners have addressed a legacy of pollution in the river by remediating contaminated sediments, stopping combined sewer overflows, reducing nonpoint source pollution, and controlling harmful invasive species like sea lamprey. The Little Rapids restoration project is the final action needed to remove habitat-related impairments on the U.S. side of the river.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Jon W. Allan, director of the Michigan Dept. of Environmental Quality Office of the Great Lakes, is an interstate compact agency established under state and U.S. federal law and dedicated to promoting a strong economy, healthy environment and high quality of life for the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence region and its residents. The Commission consists of governors’ appointees, state legislators, and agency officials from its eight member states. Associate membership for Ontario and Québec was established through the signing of a “Declaration of Partnership.” The Commission maintains a formal Observer program involving U.S. and Canadian federal agencies, tribal authorities, binational agencies and other regional interests. The Commission offices are located in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Learn more at www.glc.org.