

For immediate release
May 17, 2013

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Great Lakes Commission applauds harbor maintenance provisions in water resources legislation

Ann Arbor, Mich. – The Great Lakes Commission welcomes Senate action this week on a new Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) that includes provisions intended to increase critically needed resources to alleviate the backlog in dredging of Great Lakes ports and harbors. Reflecting a longstanding policy priority, the Commission urged the Senate to reform the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund (HMTF) to ensure that all fees collected are used for their intended purpose – maintaining our nation’s ports and harbors, including those in the Great Lakes.

The Commission also called for designating Great Lakes maritime infrastructure as a single, interconnected navigation system instead of a series of separate projects, and for a specific funding authorization for Great Lakes maritime infrastructure needs.

The Great Lakes provisions in the final bill, passed on Wednesday by an 83-14 vote, were the result of hard work and lengthy negotiations led by Senators Carl Levin and Debbie Stabenow from Michigan and their staff, with support from many Members of the Senate Great Lakes delegation. The bill makes important progress toward priorities advocated by the Commission.

- It increases authorized spending for harbor maintenance projects to \$1 billion in Fiscal Year 2014 and raises the authorization level by \$100 million every year through 2019, reaching a total of \$1.5 billion in 2020, which roughly equals the amount of fees collected each year for the HMTF.
- The bill sets aside 20 percent of authorized harbor maintenance funds above Fiscal Year 2012 levels for Great Lakes projects.
- The bill includes language stating that maintaining ports and harbors at their authorized depth and width is the primary purpose of the HMTF and that these projects should receive priority before using fees for other purposes.

(more)

Great Lakes Commission

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- In a separate colloquy on the Senate floor with the chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, which developed the WRDA bill, Senator Carl Levin, along with Senators Charles Schumer (NY) and Amy Klobuchar (MN), clarified and confirmed the Senate’s intent that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers should manage the Great Lakes Navigation System as a single system.

In addition to Senators Levin and Stabenow, the Commission applauds the efforts of Senators Tammy Baldwin (WI), Sherrod Brown (OH), Al Franken (MN), Kirsten Gillibrand (NY), Amy Klobuchar (MN), Rob Portman (OH) and Charles Schumer (NY) to secure these provisions that are vital for the long-term health of the Great Lakes navigation system.

The Senate’s action is just the first step in the legislative process. The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure is expected to begin work on a WRDA bill soon, and differences between the House and Senate bills will have to be resolved in conference committee. In addition, ensuring sufficient funding for harbor maintenance will depend on action by the Senate and House Appropriations Committees.

The Commission will continue to advocate for strong provisions that protect the long-term viability of the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River navigation system.

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The Great Lakes Commission, chaired by Kenneth G. Johnson, water division administrator at the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, 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.