CARL LEVIN
MICHIGAN

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510–2202

May 25, 2007

Mr. John Paul Woodley, Jr.
Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works
U.S. Department of the Army
108 Army Pentagon, Room 3E446
Washington, DC 20310-0108

Lt. General Robert L. Van Antwerp, Jr.
Chief of Engineers
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
441 G Street, NW
Washington, DC 20314

Dear Secretary Woodley and General Van Antwerp:

As you prepare your budget for fiscal year 2009, I want to again call your attention to the urgent needs facing the Great Lakes navigation system. Earlier this week, on May 22, I met with General Van Antwerp to discuss these issues. I am writing to you both regarding my concerns, and to urge you to address these problems in your fiscal year 2009 budget. (I already strongly urged you to act in 2007 with current funds.) The Corps estimates a backlog of 16 million cubic yards of dredging at commercial Great Lakes harbors and channels. This dredging backlog has been exacerbated by historically low water levels, and has had very real impacts on Great Lakes shipping. Several freighters have gotten stuck in Great Lakes channels, ships have had to carry reduced loads, and some shipments have simply ceased altogether.

This situation is simply not sustainable. Every year, hundreds of millions of tons of goods are transported through the Great Lakes waterways, and communities throughout the Great Lakes are economically tied to waterborne commerce. Dredging to the needed depths and maintaining other navigational features of the system is critical. This is not just a regional problem because the nation's economy is dependent on this system as freighters working in the Great Lakes carry our nation's coal to provide electricity to homes and manufacturing plants, steel for automobiles, and limestone for the construction industry.

The way the Army Corps budgets for the Great Lakes navigation projects does not reflect the true benefits of this system. Beginning in fiscal year 2005, the Army Corps began implementing new budget guidelines and criteria for funding the operation and maintenance of commercial harbors that relied primarily on the amount of tonnage a harbor handles. Although I do not object to using performance metrics, I am concerned that the metrics currently used do not adequately account for the situation at smaller harbors, many with economies that revolve around the harbor. The amount of cargo handled should not be the sole factor in determining priority for funding. A small harbor may likely have a much greater economic impact on a community than a larger harbor does. These high economic value harbors should not be short-changed. I am also concerned that the Great Lakes system as a whole may be unfairly short-changed compared with the East and West Coast harbors.

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Recently, the Great Lakes and Ohio River Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers prepared a report that outlined the needs of the Great Lakes navigation system from 2007 to 2012. This report lays out the needs of the system and also discusses the problems with the performance metrics the Army Corps is currently using in developing its budget and prioritizing water infrastructure investments. The report shows that the Great Lakes Navigation System needs about $200 million annually to meet reliability goals. Historically, however, the Great Lakes system has been budgeted on average at less than $100 million. This report shows that the Great Lakes navigation system is being short-changed about $100 million every year. The report states, "Resources available for operation and maintenance of the Great Lakes navigation system have been below the level needed to meet reliability and efficiency goals for several years."

I urge you to address the serious situation of the Great Lakes navigation system. I also ask that you carefully review the Great Lakes Navigation System Five-Year Development Plan for FY07-FY12 prepared by the Great Lakes and Ohio River Division, and support its recommendations. I hope that you will respond to the findings in that report by developing a budget that reflects the true needs of the Great Lakes navigation system. As the Army Corps itself has estimated, the budget levels for the Great Lakes need to be around $200 million so that the Great Lakes system can provide efficient and reliable maritime transportation for our nation.

Thank you for your attention to my concerns. Please feel free to contact me or Alice Yates of my staff (202-224-2683) if you have any questions. I look forward to hearing back from you regarding finding a solution to this problem.

Sincerely,

Carl Levin