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Thirty years and \$3 billion later, Olmsted Lock and Dam set to open

By Pamela Glass on JULY 31, 2018 [SHARE](#) [f](#) [t](#) [in](#) [✉](#)

The Olmsted Lock and Dam under construction, shown here in 2016. Corps of Engineers photo.

The \$3 billion Olmsted Lock and Dam project along the Ohio River will become operational in October after 30 years of construction slowdowns, funding detours and long navigational delays for the inland barge industry.

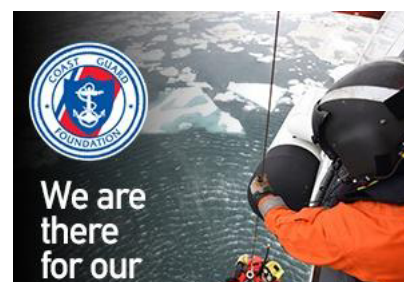
The Army Corps of Engineers will host a ribbon-cutting ceremony to mark the long-awaited opening on Aug. 30 at the site in Olmsted, Ill. **The keynote speaker will be R.D. James, the assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works.**

The opening can't come too soon for the barge industry, which has endured years of delays when the locks were closed for emergency repairs (most recently in early July), and uncertainty about the project's future due to funding lapses by Congress that caused construction setbacks.

"There are some shippers in our industry right now that are avoiding coming up the Lower Mississippi River because they don't want to go through (lock) 52 for their just-in-time commodities," Marty Hettel, vice president for government affairs at **American Commercial Barge Line** and chairman of the Inland Waterways User Board told a media briefing at Olmsted last week. "People are worried about the reliability of lock 52 and are taking more expensive routes to move their commodities."

Olmsted will replace nearby Lock and Dam 52 and 53, which were built in the 1920s and are too small to handle the demands of modern-day barge traffic. The new structure will include two 1,200' locks and a 2,500' dam, and is located 17 miles upstream from the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, which is the busiest section of the inland waterways system. About 6,500 vessels move 90 million tons of cargo a year through this area, including limestone, coal, corn and soybeans for both domestic and export markets.

When opened, the Corps estimates that locking time for barges will be greatly reduced and that navigation on this stretch of the Ohio will become more efficient and reliable. It currently takes about 60 to 90 minutes to lock through



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at 52. At Olmsted, locking should take 30-45 minutes. Having two 1200-foot chambers at Olmsted will eliminate delay times.

Opening day will be sometime in October, Col. Antoinette Gant, Louisville District Commander, told reporters, when vessel traffic will transition from locks 52 and 53 to Olmsted. She said October was a reasonable projection to get the final work done without compromising safety of construction workers.

The project will be completed by 2022 when the old locks are removed from the river.

Congress authorized the original project in 1988 for \$775 million with a completion date estimated for 2013. Costs ballooned to the current \$3 billion, partly due to funding shortfalls but also to a decision made in the 1990s to use an innovative “in-the-wet” construction process that had never been tried before, Mick Awbrey, the Corps’ deputy chief for the Olmsted Division, said at the briefing. This approach involves lowering massive concrete building components into the river, rather than creating a cofferdam that would involve draining the river to create a construction site.

Awbrey said the in-the-wet process added more time and cost to the project, but it caused fewer disruptions to commercial barge traffic on the river.

“Olmsted is a unique animal that has been done differently than any other project,” Col. Gant told the press briefing organized by the **Waterways Council** Inc. “And there are portions of what we utilized in this construction that we can pass on to other” lock and dam projects within the navigation system.

Olmsted is the largest and most expensive inland waterways project ever built in the U.S. Read more about it in the October issue of *WorkBoat*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Pamela Glass

Pamela Glass is the Washington, D.C., correspondent for WorkBoat. She reports on the decisions and deliberations of congressional committees and federal agencies that affect the maritime industry, including the Coast Guard, U.S. Maritime Administration and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Prior to coming to WorkBoat, she covered coastal, oceans and maritime industry news for 15 years for newspapers in coastal areas of Massachusetts and Michigan for Ottaway News Service, a division of the Dow Jones Company. She began her newspaper career at the New Bedford (Mass.) Standard-Times. A native of Massachusetts, she is a 1978 graduate of Wesleyan University (Conn.). She currently resides in Potomac, Md.

1 COMMENT



WILLIAM TOWNES on AUGUST 27, 2018 7:29 AM

This article as well as other press releases I have seen from the corps implies there was a “savings” to the shipping industry because of the decision of constructing “in the wet” as opposed to the “dry” cofferdam original construction process. As a tax payer, I only see a 500% overrun. Isn't there some way to put a dollar (\$) figure on the savings of using the “wet” process?

I would be much more accepting of the corp's decision to construct in the “wet” if I could see some savings.

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