Cooeration is an often overused, under-appreciated word; its true value, like money, is never keenly appreciated until it is needed. But those of us who work on the St. Lawrence Seaway, a binational waterway providing a deep draft inland waterway to North America’s industrial and agricultural riches, understand implicitly its importance.

As the St. Lawrence Seaway ends its 44th season, it is instructive to take stock of the restrictions we work under. Each winter the Seaway closes to navigation for roughly 12 weeks. Our locks are too small to accommodate larger, ocean-going vessels, and even if they were larger, channel depth systemwide is too shallow for them. These are facts.

Yet America and Canada benefit greatly from interlake trade and the modest traffic of the smaller ‘salties’ that use this marine shortcut to European markets. Since its opening in 1959, the Seaway has tallied roughly 2.5 billion tons of cargo shipped in and out of dozens of ports on the shores of the world’s largest body of freshwater lakes.

Safe, efficient and reliable movement of cargo throughout our system is due to the constant cooperation between the Seaway entities. We have joint rules and regulations, a unified traffic management system, a shared marketing approach, and a unified position on ballast water.

Clear policies and rules are essential, but no one has a personal relationship with paper. People play the decisive role in determining how well or poorly policies are implemented. When I have a Seaway problem I take it to President Guy Véronneau. Guy has served the Management Corporation and the entire Great Lakes St. Lawrence Seaway (GLSL) System with distinction, and his impending retirement reminds me of how important his help has been throughout his tenure.

From Day 1 at the helm of the SLSMC he has preached competitive position and outlook. Performance measurements, streamlined and integrated information technology systems, and rationalized maintenance planning are his standard fare. He has been the sparkplug in jumpstarting the joint Strategic Business Development Plan that endorsed partnerships throughout the system — Coast Guards and pilotage organizations, shippers and the Chamber of Maritime Commerce, government and industry. Everyone needs to be involved, he argues, or the best we can do to improve market share is ‘nibble around the margins.’

Guy understood the importance R&D plays in retaining and catalyzing Seaway growth. There is no better, more telling example of that than the Seaway website that has drawn widespread industry plaudits for ease of use, free and frequent System information, and affordable software applications. Matching cargo with customer, identifying costs easily, and tracking vessels with precision instantly; these and other tools on our website (http://www.greatlakes-seaway.com/en/home.html) have made potential customers around the world aware as never before of the Seaway and its shortcut to North America’s heartland.

When the unexpected happens cooperation is essential. The current security challenges confronting maritime organizations worldwide in the aftermath of 9/11 are receiving high-level visibility. The Canadians have assisted the SLSDC and the U.S. Coast Guard time and again, and with their help the new security paradigm facing the Great Lakes is being addressed successfully.

A new and valuable navigation tool that will help improve safety and security even as it saves shippers time and dollars is the result of binational cooperation. The Seaway entities pushed for implementation of the Automatic Identification System almost a decade ago, and they developed it with technical support from the DOT’s Volpe National Transportation Systems Center and financial and technical assistance from the Shipping Federation of Canada and the Canadian Shipowners Association. Its recent public demonstration in Montreal proved it works and its appearance now is extremely welcome.

Finally, as this article goes to press, no announcement has yet been made regarding Canadian participation in the Great Lakes Navigation study. Guy has been a staunch advocate on behalf of the SLSMC for his country’s participation, recognizing as I do the study’s importance for delivering crucial data from which our nations can fashion the best future for the Great Lakes Seaway System.

As we begin to tally the numbers posted in the last weeks of the 2002 navigation season, we would do well to ponder an intangible absent from the familiar tonnage figures for steel, iron ore, coal and grain. ‘Cooperation,’ boasting no fixed value, may well prove to be the golden key to our future.

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