



Cheboygan home to new research ship

State-of-the-art Spencer F. Baird will focus on the well-being of lake trout

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CHEBOYGAN - The lines of another new ship are gracing the Cheboygan River these days, complete with a new crew, state-of-the-art technology and multi-mission capability.

The M/V Spencer F. Baird, eight years in the making, has arrived at the Great Lakes Science Center docks just north of the State Street Bridge for use by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. The Cheboygan vessel base is shared with the U.S. Geological Survey.

The \$8 million ship was designed in Sturgeon Bay, Wis., by Tim Graul and Associates and built by Conrad Industries of Morgan City, La. It was delivered to its new homeport of Cheboygan via the Atlantic Ocean, the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes. The vessel's 40-foot height made it too high to pass beneath a bridge on the Mississippi River route, which would have been shorter.

“It's the first boat of this magnitude built for the Fish & Wildlife Service since the mid-1980s,” said Gerry Jackson, assistant regional director of the agency's fisheries division in Fort Snelling, Minn., who toured the ship Wednesday with a half-dozen other officials. “The last one built like this went to Alaska. The Baird is our largest construction project in the last 20 years, if not in our history.”

At 95 feet long and 30 feet wide, the Baird is larger than other vessels moored at the base and will replace the M/V Togue. It is powered by a 1,600 horsepower engine that drives twin screws. The ship has twin trawling winches capable of lifting 12 tons each, plus a main crane that folds out to place cargo 25 feet beyond the decks.

Accommodations exist aboard for eight people, although normal operations call for a crew of



The newest vessel on the Cheboygan Riverfront is the M/V Spencer F. Baird. The ship is the pride of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and will operate from the Cheboygan Vessel Base shared with the U.S. Geological Survey.

four. A stainless-steel galley, laundry center and communications suite will make life at sea comfortable for employees, who normally work a season from April through October and travel more than 3,000 miles in Lake Huron and Lake Michigan.

“Usually we'll run day trips and tie up at night in different ports,” said Capt. Mike Perry. “This ship has very unique missions - fish restoration and the capability of assessment.”

Perry said that means the Baird can plant fish - usually lake trout - but also capture fish and safely inspect them for a variety of items important to their well-being. The fish can then be released if possible, although certain procedures preclude that.

“Lake trout is our main focus at this time,” Perry said. “This vessel produces its own oxygen for the 10 removable fish tanks on deck. It's just like a home aquarium, really. But we could check fish and tell you what they weigh, what they've been eating. All that data is logged.”

Perry and Jackson pointed to tubes running from the tanks and said that a gravity-feed system is far preferable to pumping the fish out, as was done in the past.

“It's a lot less stressful on the fish,” Jackson said. “They just swim out.”

The water in the 10,000-gallon tanks can also be cooled to 42 degrees like the deep lake conditions from which the fish came. The agency plants four million lake trout per season, or 90 percent of the Great Lakes stock.

“Fishing is a \$4 billion to \$5 billion industry each year,” Jackson explained. “Therefore, sea lamprey control is also a mission of ours. We're tops in the world in that department.”

The Great Lakes Science Center employs 10 people in Cheboygan between the Fish & Wildlife Service and the U.S. Geological Survey, Jackson said, with engineer Bob Bergstrom kept on for winter maintenance work on the Baird.

“Many others travel here to use the three boats,” Jackson continued, “but all the Cheboygan employees live in this area. “We purchase 40,000 gallons of fuel per year locally, plus much of our supplies and maintenance needs.”

Jackson said the agency also leases some dock space from Ryba Marine. Other vessels in use here are the Grayling and the Sturgeon.

A formal dedication of the Spencer F. Baird is planned for Sept. 7 in Traverse City at the Great Lakes Maritime Academy's Hagerty Center.