

## **2004 U.S.-FLAG VESSEL UTILIZATION RATES**

The year began on a very strong note. With the closing date for the Soo Locks extended to January 24, 53 U.S.-Flag Lakers representing nearly 91 percent of carrying capacity were in service on January 1, 2004. In comparison, 2003 began with 41 vessels (approximately 72 percent of carrying capacity) in operation.

The surging demand for iron ore that prompted extension of the lock closing date did not abate during February and March. As a result, 45 vessels representing 78.5 percent of carrying capacity had fit out by April 1. Again, the comparison with a year earlier is significant. The April 1, 2004 total represented an increase of 20 hulls.

Another 11 vessels got under way during April, so by May 1, the active fleet totaled 56 hulls and 93.2 percent of carrying capacity.

By June 1, 59 Lakers were in service, an increase of four hulls compared to a year earlier. More importantly, order books were strong, so whereas one Laker ended its year in June of 2003, no early lay-ups were in the offing as Summer 2004 approached.

Technically speaking, the active fleet was down by two vessels on July 1 compared to a month earlier, but only because the cement and liquid-bulk fleets fluctuate depending on demand and supply. Even so, the 57 vessels in operation on July 1, 2004 represented an increase of five hulls compared to the same point in 2003.

With the cement and liquid-bulk fleets again fully engaged come August 1, the fleet peaked in terms of the number of active hulls at 60.

The next major development came on September 30, when the *Buckeye* returned to service after a 21-month lay-up. It is unusual to activate a vessel that late in the year, but demand for iron ore was so great that the additional carrying capacity was much needed.



*With demand for iron ore robust, the Buckeye fit-out on September 30, 2004. Although the ship has spent its entire 53-year career working the Lakes, it was built in Sparrows Point, Maryland and had to be towed up the Mississippi River before entering service in 1952. Photo: Neil Schultheiss.*

Vessel utilization rates remained steady in November and December: 59 vessels representing 96.1 percent of carrying capacity. However, if the six cement carriers and six tankers had been in service along with the 49 dry-bulk carriers that were in operation on November 1 and December 1, 96.9 percent of carrying capacity would have been underway.

One U.S.-Flag Laker, the *Courtney Burton*, did not sail in 2004. Another, the *Maumee*, was only in service for the first 10 days of January.