

ONTARIO

Border ruling a threat to town

U.S. decision driving trucks out of Sombra

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SOMBRA — A unique ferry operation in this community north of Windsor is facing an uncertain future after an edict from the U.S. Customs service.

And it's feared that without the ferry, this community of 1,500 will begin taking on water — and so will the town across the river.

Earlier this year, truckers taking the Blue Water Ferry over the St. Clair River to Marine City, Mich., were told they would need an annual permit from U.S. Customs. The policy was not new — only its sudden enforcement.

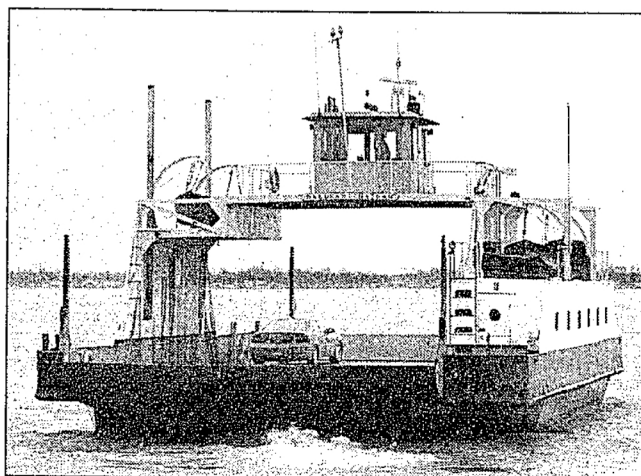
"This is a very relaxed port, so we're not used to things being enforced in a big way," explained Tony Wren, owner of the duty free store in Marine City.

Worse, U.S. Customs port director Russ Day announced that only truckers headed south to Detroit would be granted permits. Those headed north to Bay City and Saginaw are being refused and directed to use Sarnia's recently expanded Blue Water Bridge, 30 kilometres to the north.

The result: truck traffic during the winter months dropped from 20 trucks a day to about three. (The loss is all west-bound because there has been no change in Canadian rules.)

Spring's the peak delivery time for fertilizer from the Terra International plant 15 kilometres north of here, so numbers have climbed back up.

But they're still about half of normal, a loss to ferry owner Lowell Dalgety of about \$500 a day. "We don't know why they discriminated against us ... We're not too happy with it," said Dalgety, who runs the fer-



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ry with his brother Rob.

In the summer, tourist traffic pays their bills, which include the costs of the \$200,000 (U.S.) building the Dalgetys provided to house U.S. customs and immigration officials.

But without the commercial traffic, it wouldn't be worth putting the boat in the water during the winter months.

And if the ferry isn't a year-round operation, the fear is the U.S. Customs service would

close its office in the building the Dalgetys are still paying off.

That would kill the ferry and be a major blow to businesses in the two communities, whose main source of income these days is providing service to the

through traffic.

Sombra, once a lumber and shipbuilding centre, has reinvented itself in recent years with specialty and craft stores operating out of the Victorian homes that line its main street.

The Star was unable to reach Russ Day, who has told local media that permits will be approved based on whether the run makes sense and, for truckers headed north, the bridge is the most sensible route.

Barry Lonsdale, among others, doesn't understand why that's a decision for U.S. Customs. "I think the port of entry should be the choice of the customer," said Lonsdale, the plant manager of Terra International.

Roger Galloway, Sarnia-Lambton's Liberal MP, said he has protested the decision to authorities in Michigan without any result. He said the ferry's survival is critical to Sombra (pop. 1,500) as it tries to grow as a "boutique village."

"The handful of trucks crossing at Sombra are not going to make a dent in Sarnia, but it turns the crank of the Dalgety family operation," he noted.

In 1999, only 4,076 trucks crossed on the ferry. But if problems shut it down, Dalgety noted that local regulars will be affected, including about 30 nurses who commute to work in the United States every day.

"In a port this size, 95 per cent of customers are locals," Mike Wren explained from his office, overlooking the Marine City ferry landing. The ferry, which runs 16 hours a day, seven days a week, is an essential strand in the fabric of the two communities, he said.

In the summer a lot of Americans "walk to Canada for an ice cream." It's a four-minute, \$2 round trip for a pedestrian, \$4 for a car. When the horn sounds at 10:25 p.m. for the last ferry to Sombra, the bars empty in Marine City (pop. 5,000).

"It's a very unique part of the world," Wren said.

BUSINESS IS HURTING: Rob

Dalgety, above, is used to ferrying 20 trucks a day from Sombra to Michigan in peak season. But a U.S. Customs decision has left the ferry, left, nearly empty at times.