

## Panama Canal inaugurates expansion Sunday

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*The largest infrastructure project since the waterway's original construction, the Panama Canal Expansion Program will create a new lane of traffic along the Canal through the construction of a new set of locks, increasing the waterway's capacity. The new locks will have three chambers, water-saving basins, lateral filling and emptying system and rolling gates. Courtesy of [www.pancanal.com](http://www.pancanal.com)*

The COSCO Shipping Panama — a 984-foot , 158-foot wide Chinese container ship — will move into position on the Atlantic side of the Panama Canal just after sunrise Sunday to prepare for the first official transit through the newly expanded canal.

Nine years in the making and nearly two years behind schedule, the canal expansion includes deepening portions of the existing canal, new access channels, and new locks on both sides of the 50-mile-long waterway that are large enough to handle the Neopanamax ships that are too big to fit through the locks of the original 102-year-old canal.

The transit through the new Agua Clara locks is expected to get underway about 8 a.m. and the Chinese ship will arrive on the Pacific side around 4 p.m. for the official inaugural event hosted by Panama's President Juan Carlos Varela.

As the world's shipping lines have built bigger and bigger ships, the Panama Canal had no choice but to expand. The chambers of the new locks are 1,400 feet long, 180 feet wide and 60 feet deep. The old locks are just 965 feet long and 110 feet wide with a depth of 42 feet. The new locks can accommodate ships carrying up to 14,000 TEUs (the equivalent of standard 20-foot containers) — nearly three times the capacity of ships using the old locks.

"Being the master of the first vessel to transit the expanded canal is an experience of a century," said Captain Jude Rodrigues before he left the Greek port of Piraeus June 11 en route to Panama. "The Panama Canal expansion is a major event on itself and a milestone in global history."

Unlike the old canal, where electric locomotives and guide wires position ships for their passage through the locks, tugboats will guide ships through the new locks and actually enter the locks with them.

There have been ongoing squabbles between the construction consortium that built the expansion and the canal authority over who is responsible for billions in cost overruns and delays on the \$5.5 billion project, a work stoppage in 2014, worries about an El Niño-induced drought that threatened water supplies for the canal, and early problems with the concrete mix for the huge project.

"Now we're at a point where I can say the main problem is the event, and not the locks," Panama Canal Administrator Jorge Quijano told reporters in Panama.

The Chinese ship won the privilege of making the first transit when it was selected in a drawing among the canal's top customers. It will pay all fees normally associated with a canal transit on Sunday.

So far 11 heads of state and government have confirmed they will attend the inauguration ceremonies. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, will lead the U.S. delegation. It also includes John D. Feeley, U.S. ambassador to Panama; William R. Brownfield, assistant secretary of state for international narcotics and law enforcement affairs; Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, commander of the U.S. Southern Command, and Mari Carmen Aponte, acting assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

PortMiami Director Juan Kuryla and Rep. Frederica Wilson are among the local contingent who will be in Panama for the inaugural transit. Wilson said she expected the expansion and the \$1.3 billion in improvements at PortMiami so it can also handle big ships "will bring new opportunities and thousands of high-paying jobs" to South Florida.

On Monday, the expansion will open to normal commercial traffic. The canal authority said it has taken more than 150 reservations for the new locks through the end of the year. Most of the reservations are for container ships, but LPG tankers, cruise ships and other vessels also have reserved.

The canal authority will ease in the new locks, allowing only four slots daily for passages. Currently 35 to 40 ships transit the original canal per day. Both the old and new locks will continue to be used simultaneously.

