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River transportation is a national winner

Completing waterways projects quickly just makes economic sense

THE nation's policymakers are sensibly promoting energy efficiency. But they have overlooked something enormous - the infrastructure of the nation's most efficient mode of transportation.

Of \$787 billion in stimulus funds, only \$400 million went to finishing shovel-ready waterways projects that would greatly help the energy-efficient movement of goods.

The Waterways Council Inc., which advocates for shippers and barge companies, seeks to rectify that. It wants members of Congress to raise the fuel tax water users pay by 35 to 40 percent so the nation can speed completion of vital waterways improvements.

Charles T. Jones, president and chief executive officer of Amherst-Madison in the Kanawha Valley, serves on the board of directors of the council. He and representatives of the council explain the proposal this way:

Waterways users now pay a 20-cent tax on each

gallon of diesel fuel into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund. The tax produces about \$100 million a year, and is supposed to cover 50 percent of the cost of improvements, with federal funds making up the difference.

The problem is that politics cause the number of projects the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is asked to tackle to proliferate.

Funds, of course, do not. The result is that authorized projects are nickel-and-dimed over decades, growing ever more expensive as completion is delayed.

The Inland Waterway Users Board and the Corps formed a task force, prioritized projects by waterway rather than senatorial district, estimated the cost of finishing them, and committed to an increase in the fuel tax.

More than 20 senators and 200 businesses support passage of the Water Resources Development Act of 2010, and there are good reasons to give it urgent consideration.

There are solid economic and environmental reasons to support accelerated investment in river transport.

It relieves road congestion, keeping trucks off highways, is much more fuel-efficient than trucks or trains, and has the smallest carbon footprint of all three modes.

If we want to speed economic recovery, boost exports and cut emissions, what's not to like?