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## Maintain Mississippi waterway infrastructure

The nation got another reminder last week of the consequences of neglecting the foundation of a strong economy. There soon may not be enough federal money to keep Mississippi River channels open for moving cargo ships, according to a story in the Wall Street Journal.

The looming shortage of funds needed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to maintain dredging operations on the Lower Mississippi is bad news. America's ability to compete globally will be crippled if ships and barges cannot make it to ports. But that's only half the story: On the Upper Mississippi, which is particularly important for Iowa and other Midwestern states, the locks and dams that enable river navigation are long overdue to be replaced. This country's ability to move exports and imports quickly and efficiently will be lost if river navigation is not maintained and expanded. That would have serious economic implications.

The federal government faces many financial challenges right now, but rebuilding the nation's infrastructure must be made a top priority once this recession ends. That infrastructure includes runways and air-traffic control for airlines, treatment plants for drinking water and sewage, highways and bridges for trucks and cars, and transmission lines for moving electricity.

The infrastructure that enables river navigation is especially important to Iowa, which ships 260 million bushels of corn by barge on the Mississippi annually to the Gulf for export. It's estimated 60 percent of all U.S. export grains move by barge on the nation's 12,000 miles of inland waterways.

Many rivers require locks and dams and regular dredging to create deep channels for barges and ocean-going cargo ships.

The locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi - north of the Ohio River - passed their prime long ago. Many of these structures were built in the 1930s, and besides needing to shut down for frequent repairs that cause costly congestion, the locks are too short for modern barge tows that can stretch 600 feet. The Corps of Engineers has a plan for rebuilding the Mississippi locks and dams, with about half the cost coming from the barge industry and the other half from general federal tax revenues. The barge industry has supported an increase in the diesel fuel tax it pays. But Congress has not approved funding for the project.

Some environmental groups, including Audubon and the Nature Conservancy, support the Corps' plan, which includes rebuilding Mississippi wetlands and wildlife habitat. But the Izaak Walton League and other groups say the plan shifts too much of the cost to taxpayers rather than the barge industry. The Corps of Engineers - funded with federal tax dollars - pays for roughly 90 percent of river navigation maintenance costs, but the cost of lock-and-dam construction projects is split 50-50 between the industry and the Corps.

Barges are not the only beneficiaries of river infrastructure, however: Mississippi dams create economic-development opportunities, hydroelectric power generation and recreational boating, which benefit adjoining cities and states. Still, the barge industry should pay a fair share of the cost of building and maintaining this system. It's not yet clear what the right amount should be, but in principle Congress should not subsidize one mode of transportation more heavily than its competitors - namely truck and rail.

Whatever the proper balance, Congress should find it and give the Corps of Engineers sufficient money to move ahead with rebuilding the Upper Mississippi locks and dams, and dredging to the south. The economies of the Midwest, and the nation, depend on it.