



408 Kentucky Avenue • Paducah, Kentucky, 42003 • 270.575.8600

Kentucky's inland waterway system is vital to the economy

Written by Mitch McConnell

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Recent Paducah Sun articles provided excellent insight into our aging locks and dams and the delays in replacing them. I wanted to share my thoughts on this problem with your readers.

The history of Paducah is a history of life on the river. This city was originally settled because of its strategic position on the river, and traffic on the river drove its economic development. Rivers are America's original highways, vital arteries of trade and commerce.

Rivers remain a major part of our nation's transportation system, and a crucial source of jobs. Much of the energy or products we use today arrives by waterway. Nearly 1 billion tons of commodities shipped via America's waterways system in 2008, over 90 million of them through Kentucky.

Take coal. Kentucky enjoys low energy prices thanks to our abundance of coal. With waterways we can transport coal and other goods cheaply and efficiently.

Because the inland waterway system is so important to the economy we must make it a priority to modernize our locks and dams. This effort requires tough decisions and significant expense. But the alternative—underfunding the waterway system and delaying essential development—is even worse.

In my visits to Paducah and other river communities in the state, I've gotten to know and work with people who are leading the effort to revitalize our waterways. I've been a supporter of the Kentucky Lock project since its inception, and understand that at least 20 states rely on a functioning Kentucky Lock to move goods, protect jobs and keep costs low for consumers.

Major infrastructure projects at Olmsted Locks and Dam are also vital. More tonnage passes through the locks the new Olmsted Locks will replace than at any other point in America's inland waterway system.

I'm also aware of the problems with the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which since the late 1980s has been generated by a fuel tax on the towing and barge industry. For many years the fund had enough money for whatever projects were needed.

But aging infrastructure is catching up with us — exhausting more than half the fund over the previous year — and there is not enough to pay for essential projects in the coming years. The river industry has held up its end of the bargain by paying into this trust fund; the federal government needs to do its part and not hinder our efforts.

I'm encouraged by the many ideas coming from Kentuckians on how we can fix our inland waterways. Paducah's own Stephen Little and other members of the Inland Waterways Users Board are leading the effort.

Paducah's Center for Maritime Education has a simulator so aspiring mariners can see what it's like to pilot a tow boat. Anyone who's ever tried can tell you it takes a while to turn around a barge. Solving this problem will require similar foresight. But if we decide now what direction to take, we can get our waterways economy moving again and still cherish our river heritage.