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OUR EDITORIAL

Commit to our river

When U.S. Sens. Chuck Grassley, Dick Durbin, Kit Bond and Al Franken agree on a tax increase, perhaps voters should take note.

This tax increase is being sought by those who would pay it: Towboat operators and other commercial shippers relying on our Mississippi River and other inland waterways across America.

Many of those folks convene today at the Quad-Cities Waterfront Convention Center in Bettendorf for the Inland Waterways Users Board national meeting. The agenda is packed: Update ongoing river navigation projects and briefings from U.S. Army Corps of Engineers leaders who implement them.

The Inland Waterways User Board won backing of 20 U.S. senators from Mississippi River border states for a plan that would add 6 to 9 cents on top of the 20-cent-per-gallon fuel tax paid exclusively by commercial waterway users. The self-tax has been used for years to pay part of the costs for lock and other navigation infrastructure repair and expansion.

The proposal being discussed by the board in Bettendorf today doesn't spare other taxpayers. The Inland Waterways User Board wants to see their new tax revenue supplemented with even larger congressional appropriations to get long-term

commitment to these projects, instead of the start-and-stop funding they've experienced over the past decade.

Protecting agriculture jobs

Waterways Users Board member Larry Daily, president of Alter Barge Lines in Bettendorf, says inconsistent federal funding delays worthwhile projects. And delays in construction always mean major cost increases. For example, a lock expansion on Pennsylvania's Monongahela River swelled from \$534 million to \$1.76 billion while awaiting congressional funding, said Waterways Council President Cornel Martin.

Daily emphasizes the need for regular, scheduled maintenance and development of public waterways for shipping, instead of sporadic funding that shifts with political currents; or worse, emergency funding necessary after an infrastructure disaster.

The board envisions using its new tax increase and congressional appropriations to commit to an average of \$380 million per year in construction. Waterway users would provide about \$110 million each year; other taxpayers would provide about \$270 million.

We'll nigger on details for increasing the cost-share commitment for taxpayers, particularly the provision that saddles taxpayers with 100 percent of any waterway project under \$100 million. For obvious reasons trumpeted in every campaign ad by both political parties, Congress is in no position to ramp up spending anywhere.

But we strongly support a long-term plan that rewards waterway users' bigger stake with assured, fixed funding from Congress. And we support that knowing none of the Inland Waterways User Board projects are anywhere near here.

The projects are part of the Waterway Users Board's goal of a reliable, sustainable export network for American products — primarily Midwest grain. Our Iowa and Illinois corn and soybeans only get more valuable when they can reach global markets as cheaply as their South American competitors.

Daily notes that thousands of Midwest farming and ag-processing jobs rely on overseas markets. "You can't export these jobs," he said, "except by deferring maintenance on our shipping network."

That's why Republicans and Democrats from our river border states agree. So do the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Iowa and Illinois Corn Growers Associations, Farm Bureaus throughout our region and 75 ag and shipping groups in our two-state area.

America needs the economic security and sustainability offered by the Inland Waterways capital development plan.

Proposal details

Costs: \$380 million per year in construction.

Who pays: Waterway commercial shippers provide \$110 million per year through a 6-9 cent increase of the 20-cent per gallon fuel tax.

The remaining \$270 million a year would come from congressional appropriations.

Waterways plan local projects

Proposed rehabilitation and new lock expansion under the Waterways Council plan mostly targets the Ohio, Monongahela and Tennessee rivers. The closest are:

- L&D 25, Winfield, Mo.: New construction and rehabilitation in 2011 and 2012.
- L&D 22, Saverton, Mo: New construction in 2022
- L&D 24, Clarksville, Mo.: New construction in 2024