



## EDITORIAL

### “INVESTMENT”

By David Cox

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#### **Waterways improvement delays are poor policy**

When an entire industry entreats Washington, “Raise our taxes,” you would think Congress would jump on it.

But lawmakers have yet to take up an offer from the Inland Waterways Users Board to voluntarily accept a tax increase of between 30 percent and 40 percent — above the 20 cents a gallon fuel tax the industry is already paying — in exchange for a sustained commitment to annual funding for repairing and replacing the nation’s aging locks, dams and river ports infrastructure.

Stephen Little, president of Paducah’s Crouse Corporation and chairman of the Inland Waterways Users Board, says the towboat operators, though few in number, are united in their support for the voluntary tax increase that would generate \$110 million annually.

The need is obvious to anyone who takes time to look. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers operates 240 lock chambers in the U.S., and more than half are at least 50 years old, having already surpassed their original life expectancy. Many are too small for today’s large tows.

On top of that, the infrastructure is crumbling. Literally. Repairs and mechanical breakdowns cause delays of more than 150,000 hours a year. The delays raise the cost of shipping, and those costs are eventually passed down to consumers.

We can safely say that lawmakers’ inaction is not due to the high cost of the proposal. The amount the industry is asking — \$270 million annually — is lunch money for this spendthrift Congress.

The problem could simply be that commercial shipping on our waterways escapes the attention of most Americans, leaving it off Washington's radar as well.

Even in Paducah, the operational hub of the nation's river industry, many people go about their daily lives without giving the industry a thought, unless they happen to drive through the flood wall to sit by the river. And even then, what they observe are towboats and barges moving lazily past, giving no hint of the magnitude of their impact on the economy.

But the impact is enormous. Barges move nearly 1 billion tons of cargo on the nation's inland waterways every year. That includes 60 percent of the nation's grain exports, 22 percent of domestic petroleum and 20 percent of the coal used in power plants.

No other mode of transportation can match the cost and fuel efficiency of barges for such commodities. A 15-barge tow like the ones we see chugging past Paducah on the Ohio and Tennessee rivers every day carries a load that would take 216 rail cars with six locomotives to move. Or more than 1,000 large semi tractor-trailers.

The federal government is replacing some of the older infrastructure, but funding is sporadic. New construction, hampered by delays and overruns, is not keeping pace with deterioration.

A glaring example of the problem is in our own backyard; construction on Olmsted Locks and Dams began in 1994 and was projected to reach completion in 2006, at a total cost of \$770 million. Now the cost has soared past \$2 billion and projected completion has been pushed to 2021.

Funding is only part of the problem. At the Inland Waterways Users Board's request, the Corps studied the overruns and found that one third of the problem was attributable to lack of funding; the rest was due to errors and inefficiencies.

Armed with the study, Little's board prepared a comprehensive proposal to accelerate construction with improved efficiency and consistent funding.

That's where the Waterways Council comes in. The Council is lobbying Congress to approve the commercial shippers' proposal. Sen. Mitch McConnell is on board, along with other senators. But the industry is still waiting on support from the White House, which has been sitting on the proposal since April.

Yes, Congress must cut spending and reduce the federal deficit. But maintaining navigable waterways is one of the few constitutionally identified powers of the federal government. The proposal merits funding.

The towboat operators are ready to do their part. Congress should do likewise.

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