

Waterways need attention

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The evening news rivets our attention to the tragic flooding from the nation's Midwest to the Mississippi Delta and the Atchafalaya Basin. The images of the swollen Mississippi River, flooded towns and gushing floodgate waters are probably all Floridians know about the river system in that part of America.

But the benefits of America's inland waterways are many. They are a precious resource, and the envy of the world because of the natural "water highway" the waterways system provides for commerce and competition.

This segment of the transportation network is often out of sight, out of mind, as it quietly transports over 624 million tons of "building block" commodities annually for use in this country and for export. Without this critically important mode, our nation's roadways -- including I-95 and I-4 -- would clog and crumble, our air quality would diminish, our consumption of, and cost for, energy and utilities would increase, our global economic competitiveness would erode, and our quality of life would fail.

Those tons of cargo put around \$70 billion into the U.S. economy, providing lower shipping costs that help farmers to be competitive in world markets. It allows our

building materials to move more cheaply, and keeps our electricity rates lower. In fact, many of Florida's power plants like TECO Electric and Progress Energy get some of their coal from the Kanawha and Ohio River valleys by barge.

More than 60 percent of the nation's grain exports, 22 percent of our domestic petroleum and petroleum products, and 20 percent of the coal used in electricity generation moves on our nation's waterways. As President Barack Obama urges the doubling of U.S. exports by 2014, the inland waterways will be the key to that expansion.

The inland rivers also relieve traffic congestion. Just one 15-barge tow of dry bulk cargo keeps 1,050 trucks off our nation's already overcrowded highways, or 216 railcars from blocking railroad crossings in our communities.

Inland waterways transportation has a lower carbon footprint and generates fewer carbon dioxide emissions than rail or truck. It is also more energy-efficient: Barges can move 1 ton of cargo 576 miles on 1 gallon of fuel -- 100 miles more than rail transport and 400 miles more than truck transport.

But some lock and dam structures are more than 50 years beyond their designated lifespan and require recapitalization. Dredging our rivers and repairing our locks should be as important as filling potholes and maintaining and building new bridges.

There is a plan to fund that recapitalization, known as the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan, developed over an 18-month period by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and members of the Inland Waterways Users Board. The plan prioritizes navigation projects across the entire waterways system, improves the corps' management and processes to deliver projects on time and on budget, and recommends a funding mechanism that is affordable to meet the system's needs. We urge Congress to support this important initiative and to take steps toward caring for the infrastructure that keeps America moving!