

OPINIONS

Editorial: Congress needs to reinvest in waterway systems

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Even in a riverfront region such as ours, many of us do not fully realize the importance of our nation's waterways to the local and national economy.

We see the barges going up and down the Ohio, Big Sandy or Kanawha rivers, and we may have read something about the Port of Huntington being the nation's busiest inland port. But unless you are involved in the coal industry or the shipping business, you may not understand the role those barges play in getting America's goods to market.

In short, it's huge.

The 12,000 miles of river waterways across our country carry about \$70 billion in goods each year. That includes coal from our region, grain from the Midwest and a range of other cargo from chemicals to iron and steel.

Moving those commodities by rail or truck is not practical in some cases, and it would also cost more and take a greater toll on the environment. For example, the goods shipped on one 15-barge tow would require 216 rail cars and six locomotives or 1,050 tractor trailer trucks, according to the National Waterways Foundation.

That's more fuel, more people, more emissions and more cost.

So, our river systems play a big part in allowing our industries to compete nationally and globally. They also provide tremendous recreational, development and environmental benefits to all the communities along the way.

Unfortunately, the maintenance of the waterways and the deterioration of the locks and dams that connect them is reaching a crisis level.

Just last year, barges backed up along the Ohio River when mechanical problems closed the Greenup Locks and Dam in Kentucky. And similar problems are becoming commonplace with the aging of the 240 locks across the country operated by the Corps of Engineers.

Half of these facilities are more than 50 years old, and the maintenance and replacement projects meant to keep them going are as backed up as the barges on the Mississippi this month. Current funding might get six of these projects done over the next 20 years, but the Corps has identified dozens of critical projects that need to be completed soon.

For all those reasons, a coalition of waterways supporters is pushing the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan, which would prioritize the completion of key projects and develop a funding system to get the work done.

The plan would commit about \$7 billion over the 20-year period, which would cover 25 priority projects, including work at Greenup and the Marmet Locks and Dam in Belle, W.Va. The barge industry is volunteering to accept a 30-40 percent increase in the tax it pays into the project fund, and the list of supporters includes a broad mix of industry, agricultural and environmental groups.

The plan also would require a commitment of about \$270 million per year from the federal government, and of course, this is a very difficult time for Congress to look at additional spending. However, that is much less than the federal support for aviation and highways systems. Florida just rejected \$2.4 billion in high-speed rail grants.

Even in tough times, it is important to invest in critical needs, especially for a transportation system with a proven track record. A comprehensive plan to maintain U.S. waterways has been on hold too long, and Congress needs to act soon.