

Missoulian

Waterways urgently need updates

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The rivers that run through western Montana are prized for many reasons, not least of which is their value as an economic driver for tourism and recreation-related businesses. Yet most Missoulians probably don't give much thought to the importance of the nation's larger waterways which, while not located right in our backyard, have a major impact on Montana's economy - especially farms, coal producers and consumers.

These waterways help move some 625 million tons of goods each year, and are an essential part of the U.S. commodities transportation system, alongside the interstate road and rail systems. According to Waterways Council Inc., more than 60 percent of the nation's grain exports travel along an inland waterway at some point, as well as 20 percent of the nation's coal. That includes grain from Montana farms and coal from Montana mines.

Unfortunately, much of the nation's inland waterways infrastructure, such as locks and dams, has exceeded its "economic design life," Waterways Council board president Richard Calhoun told the Missoulian editorial board recently. This means that many of the locks and dams built in the 1930s have not been updated; some are literally crumbling into the water, many are unable to handle severe weather and floods, and others simply cannot accommodate the more modern barges, which are longer than older models, without significant delays.

Calhoun, who is also president of Minnesota-based Cargill Cargo Carriers, said that the list of needed improvement projects has only grown longer and more expensive with time, and the Army Corps of Engineers is increasingly challenged to find more efficient ways of funding these projects.

He noted that Montana's senior U.S. senator, as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, is a key supporter of the push to improve the nation's inland waterways infrastructure. Sen. Max Baucus is among the supporters of a plan that would provide up to \$380 million a year for 20 years, for a total cost of \$7.6 billion. That

money would allow the Corps to complete 25 priority projects - instead of only the six it has slated for completion right now.

At a time when any new government funding is a tough sell, it's important to note that many in the waterways transportation industry, including Calhoun, are willing to back the plan with their own money. They would, in fact, be the ones paying the new tax, which would be matched with federal dollars and collected into a trust.

The Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan is among many items the Senate Finance Committee will take under consideration this congressional session. It appears we can count committee chairman Baucus among those who view the plan as a long-overdue investment in an important branch of the nation's transportation system - one that will make the flow of goods much more efficient, even for those of us who live far away from such waterways.

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