

Study says river transport produces big benefits Report lists lesser-known pluses

By Pamela Glass

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The benefits from inland river transportation are far more extensive than originally thought when the waterways navigation system was established, reaching a vast array of consumers and businesses and offering significant economic and environmental benefits, according to a new study.

Most of the nation's inland network was developed for commercial navigation, hydroelectric generation and flood control and it continues to offer “tangible benefits” in these areas. But it's the lesser-known benefits “that are possibly of equal and greater value.”

“Very likely, air quality impacts, recreational usage, and freight network congestion mitigation were practically unheard of policy goals when the modern waterway system was designed, yet these uses are now important sources of project benefits and critical elements within system management plans,” said the report, requested by the **Inland Waterways Users Board**, a quasi-federal advisory group.

“Direct navigation users — those involved in the actual navigation function of barge transport of commodities and equipment from waterway origin to destination — receive only a small portion of the total benefits the navigable waterway makes available,” wrote researchers at the Center for Transportation Research at the University of Tennessee. The report was authored by Larry Bray, C. Michael and Chrisman Dager.

Among the conclusions:

Shipper savings: Ohio River basin commercial navigation users saved \$3.1 billion to ship coal, steel, chemicals and other commodities by barge when compared to other transport modes.

Economic impacts: Freight cost savings enjoyed by industries usually result in higher employment, income and sales.

Recreation: Locks and dams create recreational opportunities.

Congestion and safety improvements: Unlike other modes, barge movements are separated from other means of transport, which leads to reduced highway congestion and improved public safety.

Mosquito control: The navigation channel is raised and lowered occasionally to control mosquito infestation along the Tennessee River.

Rocket transport: NASA uses the waterways to transport rockets manufactured in Decatur, Ga.

Steve Little, chairman of the Inland Waterways Users Board and president of **Crouse Corp.**, a Paducah, Ky.-based barge line, said the industry would use the report's conclusions in arguing for passage of a plan to reform the way federal navigation projects are financed and managed.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which funds and manages the inland system, rejected the Inland Waterways Capital Development Plan in December, saying it shifted too much of costs for new inland construction to the federal government. But industry leaders say they will still push for approval of the plan in Congress over the Obama administration's objections.