



Editorial

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Needed investment

Bush should sign the water resources act into law.

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Houston is one of the world's largest ports. In addition to its record foreign tonnage, the port ships over inland waterways to 32 states. Few communities are more dependent than Houston on the nation's waterways and the infrastructure that makes them navigable.

Congress recently passed and sent to the White House the Water Resources and Development Act. The act authorizes billions of dollars to repair and replace deteriorating and damaged dams and locks, and to dredge shoaled river channels. Like the nation's bridges and air traffic control system, the nation's water-borne commerce is approaching a crisis of unreliability.

Although this legislation passed by wide, veto-proof margins in both houses, the Bush administration threatens a presidential veto. Administration officials say the bill includes too many pork projects unrelated to the Army Corps of Engineers' primary mission. Perhaps that's true, but all the projects are beneficial, and most are urgent. As Assistant Secretary of the Army John Paul Woodley Jr., and then-White House budget director Rob Portman wrote in a letter to a member of Congress, the corps already has \$38 billion in outstanding projects that need funding. Declining to fund this year's urgent projects courts disaster.

Environmental activists and the towing and barge industry once failed to get along, but that has changed. The men and women on U.S. waterways are a valuable means of fuel conservation and reduced carbon emissions, moving 16 percent of all cargo at a fraction of the fuel cost. The barge industry fully supports restoration of wetlands, which protect wildlife and shipping channels from storm damage.

Quite apart from this year's waterway authorization bill, Congress and the Corps of Engineers need to change the way waterway projects are funded. Stop-and-go funding costs taxpayers added billions of dollars as workers and equipment are mobilized and then demobilized. Projects that should take eight to 10 years drag on for 20 or 25 years. All the while construction and dredging costs are rising.

Investment in America's waterways is good for the economy and good for the environment. Not only do barges reduce harmful emissions, they keep dangerous cargos off the highway.

President Bush should reconsider his opposition and sign the Water Resources and Development Act into law. Despite the unnecessary pork, the bill is a good deal for taxpayers and vital to port cities such as Houston, which ships the fuel and chemicals and aggregate that are the building blocks of the nation's commercial life.