

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

The unsung hero of transportation

By Mark Knoy

02/09/2010

As environmental concerns become ever more pressing, it's time for river transportation to step into the spotlight.

Those of us close to the rivers have long known the efficiency of barge transportation. Studies show that one barge can move one ton of cargo 576 miles per gallon of fuel. By comparison, a rail car would move the same ton of cargo 413 miles, and a truck only 155 miles.

Barge transportation is cleaner, too, producing far fewer carbon emissions than truck or rail. Plus, the generous size of a single barge gives it the same capacity as 70 trucks or 16 rail cars. River transportation helps reduce congestion on the nation's crowded highways.

Beyond its environmental benefits, the river improves the quality of life for many by delivering the goods our world depends on, including corn, soybeans, wheat, coal, petroleum, fertilizer and building materials. And because river commerce offers the lowest transportation cost, consumers enjoy these essentials for less.

Our region is blessed to be home to the Mighty Mississippi, the heart of America's inland water transportation system. In 2005, more than 139.5 million tons of commodities valued at \$19 billion were shipped on the river system to, from and within Missouri and Illinois.

To ensure the industry's ability to safely and efficiently move these commodities, it's critical that we properly maintain and update our nation's navigation infrastructure: locks, dams, terminals and related facilities. A proposal in our nation's capital could be a catalyst to make that happen.

In December, a top-level team consisting of key government personnel and other stakeholders issued recommendations that would prioritize, over a 20-year period,

navigation projects across the nation's waterways system, improve the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' project management and processes and recommend an affordable funding mechanism to meet system needs.

That proposed funding mechanism may include an increase in the current fuel tax of 20 cents per gallon paid by river transportation companies (the only group of system users that is taxed). We view this potential additional cost as a worthwhile investment to ensure the future viability of America's inland waterways system.

A modern lock-and-dam navigation system is essential to the health and vitality of our nation — to U.S. competitiveness in the world market, environmental protection and job stability.

If adopted by Congress, these recommendations would help ensure that our nation continues to enjoy the full benefit of efficient, clean, quiet river commerce. This is good public policy for the nation and particularly for the people of Missouri and Illinois.

AEP River Operations is proud to work with nature's own waterways to provide an environmentally friendly means of transportation. But the benefits of our country's rivers go far beyond the barge industry. The river gives to us all, providing recreation, hydropower, flood control, drinking water and a haven for birds, fish and other wildlife. We all stand to benefit by taking steps to ensure the health, strength and stability of our inland waterways for years to come.

Mark Knoy is president of AEP River Operations in Chesterfield. He is a former chairman of Waterways Council Inc., the national public policy organization advocating for a modern and well-maintained system of inland ports and waterways.