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A Flood of Trouble

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OPINION

Except in coastal areas like ours, America's waterways, locks, dams and ports are perhaps the most overlooked, but no less important, cog in the engine of our economic life.

Some 16 percent of the nation's freight comes to consumers by water, at only 2 percent of freight transportation costs, saving consumers and shippers \$7 billion each year, compared to other forms of transportation.

Waterways transport hauls cargo equal to 40 million trucks or 10 million rail cars, making it a more environmentally friendly mode of commerce.

But the sad truth is, America's dams are ancient by construction standards. And without serious efforts & serious money & our nation's economy and our national security, are in the crosshairs.

According to The Waterways Council, America's locks and dams are an average of 50 years old, the limit for their use. Some are far older. For example:

- Locks on the Lower Monongahela River in Pennsylvania were built in 1907;
- The Olmstead Locks and Dam serving Kentucky, Illinois and Ohio were built to replace two locks built in 1929;
- And closer to home, the Industrial Canal lock in New Orleans were constructed in the 1920s.

The fact is, the nation's water-related infrastructure is in a flood of trouble.

Fortunately, the Bush administration's fiscal 2005 budget request calls for spending between \$115 and \$133 million for improvements to inland locks and dams, the highest recommendation in recent decades. The money will come from the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which has a \$400 million surplus. While the trust fund may be an obscure part of the federal budget, it's critical, because the money was specifically set aside to maintain America's water infrastructure.

Two years ago, the Bush administration tried unsuccessfully to take money from the inland waterways fund, as well as the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund for routine dredging, a function traditionally bankrolled by the general fund; in essence, robbing Peter to pay Paul.

Also, the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund is \$2.6 billion strong, sitting, waiting to be spent. It's perplexing that Congress, indeed the White House, two entities historically never shy about spending, seems to be hoarding the money, even in the face of tremendous need.

From an economic perspective, trade is expected to double within the next 20 to 30 years, placing a greater burden on an already weary and worn system.

And while much of the nation's attention concerning homeland security has swirled around the nation's rails following the Madrid train attacks earlier this month, our ports, dams and waterways deserve equal attention. Earlier this year, a ship that sank near the mouth of the Mississippi shut the river down. The tragedy was not the work of terrorists, but if a 9-11-type tragedy slammed a key lock system, port or waterway, the human and economic impact would be devastating.

To its credit, Congress has authorized funding for improving port security through the Maritime Port Security Act. However, authorization alone is not enough. Too, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Coast Guard have received more funding.

However, that alone won't make our infrastructure, once-proud engineering marvels now past their prime, less vulnerable to natural, or man-made disasters.

The money is there in the Harbor Maintenance. Spend it, but only for the specific purpose Congress intended.

In the post-9-11 world, holding the trust fund money is at best irresponsible, at worst, dangerous to the security of the nation.