



OPINION

Barge in but don't lock out nature

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Earlier this summer, Illinois Sen. Dick Durbin was confident Congress would sign off on a \$23 billion measure authorizing hundreds of Army Corps of Engineers projects. "We're going to pass it," he vowed of the Water Resources Development Act, aka WRDA. After a two-year holdup, the Senate recently proved him a prophet.

Unlike Durbin and his colleagues - Sen. Barack Obama and Rep. Ray LaHood are solidly on board, too - we've not been quite as enthusiastic about WRDA. Though it contains big plans for the upper Mississippi and Illinois waterways, both for navigation and environmental restoration, this bill has always seemed more luster and bluster.

Pro-commerce groups like the Illinois Corn Growers Association and the Waterways Council champion WRDA because of its intention to spend nearly \$2 billion to expand and upgrade seven Midwestern locks, including those at LaGrange and Peoria, which would go from 600 to 1,200 feet. Some of their arguments have merit. For instance, both Peoria and LaGrange were built before Hitler invaded Poland. After more than seven decades, they need work. "If locks were people, they'd be getting Social Security by now, frankly," quipped Paul Rohde of the Waterways Council, during a barge tour through Peoria's lock last August.

These groups also note that river commerce is more environmentally friendly than rail or truck. True enough - a 15-barge tow carries as much freight as 870 semis. It's more economical to haul fertilizer, road salt, coal, gravel and the like over water, yet roads get built while the locks deteriorate.

To be sure, getting through Peoria's lock is a two-hour ordeal. Tows must be uncoupled, which is dangerous work. But that's the shippers' fault for expanding the size of tows. Furthermore, it's fair to be skeptical of predictions that Illinois' barge business will boom. The Corps' log of traffic shows no sustained increases; the total annual barge tonnage passing through Peoria has hovered around 30 million tons since 1970. Arguably that's a path-of-least-resistance issue, in which case making it easier and faster to get through the locks might stimulate more traffic. It is important to try to maintain a balance between two of the river's primary functions - commerce and recreation - while recognizing it's also home to a lot of life that shares the planet with us humans.

To that latter point we wonder whether many of WRDA's ballyhooed environmental projects will ever see fruition. This measure contains no actual money. It merely authorizes plans. Congress must follow up by appropriating a promised \$1.7 billion for programs on the upper Mississippi and Illinois. If commerce were to prevail over conservation here in yet another deficit budget, it wouldn't be the first time.

In fact several Peoria-area projects the Illinois Department of Natural Resources has pegged as "critical" have been languishing because Congress never OK'd the funding. Brad Thompson of the Corps' Rock Island District said WRDA extends authorization for those, including a 54-acre dredge of Lower Peoria Lake and wintering habitat restoration at Pekin Lake. It would be nice to get those done so we could move on to others, such as deepening backwater channels north of Chillicothe.

Environmental groups are split over WRDA. The Sierra Club objects to WRDA's permission for the Corps to mess with Mother Nature's riparian handiwork. "Rivers have suffered from turbidity caused by barge traffic," said Peoria Chapter President Joyce Blumenshine. But the Nature Conservancy likes WRDA because it lets the Corps keep working on two pet projects - Spunky Bottoms and Emiquon. "From an ecosystem restoration side, it's been a long time coming," said the Conservancy's Claudia Emken.

President Bush has indicated he'll veto WRDA because it came in \$9 billion higher than expected, but both the Senate and House appear to have veto-proof majorities.

We hope this legislation eventually benefits Peoria, which is trying to market a port district. If those backing WRDA were to keep their word and find funding for the promised restoration projects, we also might be more inclined to jump on board this barge in the future.