

PIONEER



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OPINION

EDITORIALS

THE RIVER

Break lock repair logjam in Congress

For 18 years, the federal government has been levying a 20-cents-a-gallon diesel tax on river barge operators, with the promise that the money would be matched with federal dollars to fund navigability projects such as lock and dam renovations.

But Congress has failed to hold up its end of the bargain in recent years. More than \$400 million in diesel tax revenue sits unused in the Inland Waterways Trust Fund — where it is being used to help offset bulging federal budget deficits. Meanwhile, the nation's locks and dams continue to suffer from deferred maintenance while the federal government continues to collect but not spend diesel taxes.

Why should this matter to the average Minnesotan? For several reasons:

- Minnesota farmers rely on river barges to get their crops to market. Almost 13 million tons of cargo move on the Mississippi in Minnesota each year. If seven critical locks along the river are not upgraded by 2020, industry representatives estimate that Minnesota will lose \$115 million in farm income to foreign competitors.

- The nation's inland waterways carry more than 1 billion tons of domestic cargo — valued at \$312 billion — annually, fueling the U.S. economy and providing jobs. Lock delays and failures cost U.S. industry \$155 million annually.

- River barges are a cost-effective and efficient means of moving cargo. They keep semi-truck traffic down on the nation's highways. Barges move 16 percent of the nation's cargo annually, for just 2 percent of the overall cargo-transportation cost. One barge holds the equivalent of 58 semi-loads of cargo and can move a ton of cargo 522 miles on one gallon of diesel, compared to 59 miles by truck.

- Barges are a safe and environmentally friendly mode of cargo transport. Barges record fewer spills than trucks or rail and emit fewer pollutants into the air.

Of particular concern to barge operators are antiquated 600-foot locks on the upper Mississippi that stack up 1,200-foot tows and barges that must be uncoupled, passed through the lock in sections, then recoupled. This increases the freight costs for farmers and manufacturers.

Barge operators are asking the federal government to spend \$150 million a year to help spend down the trust fund surplus and to improve navigability on the river. President Bush has proposed an increase in spending of between \$115 million and \$133 million on lock and dam projects for fiscal 2005.

That's a start, but it still falls short.