

EDITORIALS

Inland waterways vital

Barges and towboats move 16 percent of U.S. freight for only 2 percent of cost

An efficient but often overlooked component of our nation's transportation system is water. For some reason, barges, tugboats and towboats prompt images of yesteryear and long-abandoned canals. Yet they transport 16 percent of the country's freight — and for only 2 percent of the freight cost.

But improvements and upgrades of ports, locks and dams and other components of the inland-waterways system have fallen behind.

In 1978, the Inland Waterways Trust Fund was established to pay half the costs of capital improvements and major rehabilitation on the various rivers that comprise the inland system. The trust fund is supported by a diesel fuel tax paid for by the barge industry. The federal government was to pay for the other half.

For the past several years, though, the government has not been living up to its end of that agreement: It has not matched the funds contributed by the industry, and it has not released the trust fund money to pay for badly needed improvements in the inland-waterway system. Consequently, the trust fund has a \$412 million surplus that is being used to offset the federal deficit.

That's a mistake. *The Dispatch* long has advocated preserving government trust funds for the purposes for which they were created. This one should be no exception. A modernized system keeps barges and other water transport from backing up along rivers, and consumers and producers alike benefit from locks and dams

working efficiently.

One jumbo barge has the same load capacity as 58 trucks or 15 railroad cars. A gallon of fuel can move 1 ton of cargo 522 miles by barge, compared with 386 miles by rail and only 59 miles by truck.

Although environmentalists have been concerned about the effect of barge traffic on river quality, water transport does have environmental and safety benefits. Trucks and trains consume far more fuel per ton-mile and emit more pollution than do barges. Without barges, an additional 40 million trucks or 10 million rail cars would be needed.

Moving large amounts of bulk commodities, such as coal, grain, petroleum products and steel, by water

reduces highway congestion and accidents. To help keep these goods moving in the least-costly manner, the trust fund money should be released for its intended purpose.

On a similar note that is vital to the

industry, a proposal in President Bush's fiscal year 2004 budget that would use the trust fund to pay for operation and routine maintenance of the river system should be eliminated.

The trust fund was intended to upgrade — not operate — locks, dams and other waterway-transport necessities. If this proposal is approved, the industry fears the trust fund would be bankrupt within three years, and the cost of moving commodities would rise significantly, bringing higher prices for consumers.

Waterway transit affects much of Ohio. From farmers' grain and fertilizer to coal for power plants to the salt used on ice-covered streets, barges move commodities and other material vital to society's most basic needs. And they do so cheaply. Congress should consider this in deciding the fate of this important trust fund.

