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EDITORIALS

Open the Floodgates

Congress should release inland waterway funds

Most of us probably think of barges as a sweet feature of another time, another century. You know, the Mississippi River and Tom Sawyer lore.

That image couldn't be further from the truth. Barges carry substantial loads along inland waterways. Sixteen percent of American freight gets shipped that way. And it is an eco-friendly and fuel-efficient form of transportation.

The problem is, our inland waterways need constant attention. Like roads and bridges, locks and dams require repair.

Without upgrades, commerce gets backed up.

That's what's happening in places like the Ohio River. Delays in repairing locks and dams there cost the nation \$500 million annually in lost economic benefits. That includes petrochemical products that are made in Texas but take too long to get shipped to the Midwest.

Money to modernize locks and dams along the Ohio and other waterways is sitting in a federal trust fund. But Washington is not releasing much of it. The White House and Capitol Hill want most of the fund's \$400 million surplus to offset the deficit.

This is not the first time lawmakers have used a transportation trust fund surplus to improve the deficit picture. As deficits raged in the 1990s, Congress did not want to spend money from aviation and highway trust funds.

That sleight of hand wasn't right then, and it's not now. It's especially not right since private companies pay half the investment in the federal fund. (Taxpayers finance the other part.)

The Senate is slated to take up this issue tomorrow. Senators will consider approving \$132 million from the trust fund for

projects next year. That's better than the House's \$118 million.

Still, it's not sufficient. Barge industry representatives advocate spending \$150 million annually for the next decade. That's a worthwhile goal, particularly since Congress has the money.

We urge Texas' own Sens. Kay Hutchison and John Cornyn to press for greater use of the trust fund. The deficit is real, but these dollars already have been collected. They need to go to their intended purpose, which will allow goods to move efficiently and with less environmental cost.

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