



JOSEPH BONNEY

A story to tell

One river barge can carry as much as 70 trucks, but inland towing probably commands one-seventieth as much public attention as trucking.

The comparative anonymity is understandable, given the unglamorous cargoes that barges tend to carry, the fact that much waterway commerce is conducted out of public view, and the industry's size. "We're probably a \$10 billion to \$15 billion business, about the size of one railroad or one major airline," says Peter Stephaich, chairman of Campbell Transportation Co. in Pittsburgh.

Inland towing's low profile wouldn't matter, except for its effect on legislation and regulation. Out of sight, out of mind generally doesn't equate to good results in Washington.

That's one reason for a current initiative by the National Waterways Foundation, an organization that was established in 1978 with industry backing and revived a few years ago after a long period of dormancy. Matt Woodruff, an NWF board member and director of government relations for Kirby Corp., said the foundation's mission is "to get good, solid data and take it to the public and to decision-makers."

Step One is a new study by the Texas Transportation Institute's Center for Ports and Waterways at Texas A&M. The study, funded by the NWF and the Maritime Administration, compares the economic, environmental, safety and societal impacts of river barges with highway and rail transportation.

To give a real-world example, the study examined what would happen if a waterway closure at St. Louis forced all cargo now shipped through the area to move by truck. The findings: Such a disruption would cause truck traffic and highway costs to double, traffic delays to quintuple, and maintenance costs, injuries and fatalities to rise.

The study updates previously quoted statistics — generated so long ago that the sourcing had gotten fuzzy — to show that barges can move one ton of cargo 576 miles on a gallon of fuel, compared with 413 miles for a railcar and 155 for a truck.

"This is the first of what we hope will be many such studies, all of which we hope will be similar high-quality, peer-reviewed, substantial research that will stand up to scrutiny," Woodruff said.

The NWF doesn't plan for the new study to gather dust on a shelf. The foundation has distilled some of the report's information into a brochure, made it available on its Web site, www.nationalwaterwaysfoundation.org, and is preparing a speakers' bureau package of visuals, bullet points and background for use in presentations to general audiences.

"We think we have a good story to tell as an industry," Stephaich says. "We have a good story from the perspective of capacity, fuel economy, the environment and sustainability. And we're the only transportation mode with spare capacity."

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