

# OPINION

## THE PLAIN DEALER

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### Break the river-funding dam

Nearly 20 years ago, Congress made a deal with the people who haul jobs up and down America's 27 shallow-draft, inland waterways: Agree to a 20-cent-a-gallon tax on the fuel that powers your towboats, and the federal government will match that money to repair and improve the locks and dams that make those rivers navigable.

Thus was born the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, an account that has collected nearly \$1.6 billion since it was created in the Water Resources Development Act of 1986.

But the temptation with such replenishing accounts, especially when the government faces mounting deficits, is to hold on to the money rather than spend it for its promised ends. The unspent balance, although technically encumbered, can be counted against deficit numbers so the shortfall doesn't look as bad as it is.

That's what has happened with the waterways trust fund since 1993. First, the administration of Bill Clinton slowed the spending that Congress had promised until now the fund has

a surplus of more than \$400 million. Now President George W. Bush has proposed tapping that capital improvements trust to pay for operating expenses — something that was never intended in the founding legislation.

Meanwhile, work on the navigation infrastructure — repair of dams, replacement of old, 600-foot locks with the 1,200-foot passages necessary to larger, more practical tow configurations — is being slowed to a crawl.

This is a foolish economy. These waterways, large among them the Ohio River, each year carry some \$30 billion in farm products, coal, chemicals and other bulk commodities that provide jobs for hundreds of thousands of Americans along the manufacturing process.

Inland waterways work — every day, despite the failure of successive administrations to meet their obligations. The money has been collected by the government from the companies that use them. It is incumbent upon that government now to follow through and provide, without further delay, the improvements it has promised.