

## Rollin' on the River

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By Nathan Blackford - Warrick Publishing Online

Watching barges slowly work their way up and down the Ohio River is familiar enough for many people in southern Indiana. But the opposite perspective, standing on the barge and watching as the towns and trees go by, is something else entirely.



On Monday, a few hundred local farmers, elected officials and other invited guests were given a three-hour tour on the river by the Indiana Corn Grower's Association and the Indiana Corn Marketing Council.

*A group of local farmers, along with other members of the public, took a tour of the line boat "Chip Lacy" on Monday morning during a short cruise down the Ohio River. The event, hosted by the Indiana Corn Grower's Association and the Indiana Corn Marketing Council, also featured several speakers, including U.S. Rep. Brad Ellsworth. Photo by Nathan Blackford*

The unquestioned highlight of the cruise was the unique perspective of the river it provided. However, the trip was really intended to encourage support for river transportation, a major factor in how much money it takes to grow and transport corn and other crops.

Two U.S. Congressmen, including Indiana 8th District Rep. Brad Ellsworth and Minnesota's Collin Peterson, spoke on the importance of river transportation.

"(Brazilian farmers) could produce soybeans for \$2.50 per bushel," said Peterson, who is the chairman of the U.S. House Agricultural Committee. "Their problem is that it costs them another \$2.50 per bushel to get it out of the country, and their government has not put the money into the transportation system like we have in the United States. The reason we are able to compete with Brazil is because of a system like this, with the Ohio River and the Mississippi River."

Ellsworth joked about his lack of experience with farming, but said his appointment to the Agricultural Committee was a job he took very seriously. He said he wanted to hear the concerns of local farmers.

"With all the challenges today — fuel prices, transportation and international trade — that affect you and the job you're doing, every decision that we make is going to be important," said Ellsworth. "The more we learn about that, the better off we'll be."

The cost of transportation on a river is far less than rail or truck. On average, a gallon of fuel can move a ton of freight 59 miles on a highway, 202 miles on a train, or 514 miles on the river system. Common commodities moved on river barges include animal feed, fertilizer, corn,

wheat, soybeans, coal and petroleum.

The Ohio River flows 981 miles from Pittsburgh, Pa. to Cairo, Ill. The river borders six states and 72 counties. There are 20 locks and dams on the river.

"The Ohio River today is a very different river than the one encountered by French explorers of the 1600s," said Chuck Parrish of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. "It is an altered river, an engineered river. Prior to any improvements along the Ohio River, there were many places in the dry seasons of the year where you could walk across the river bottom."

The Newburgh Dam was a point of interest for many of the corn growers from Illinois who took the tour. It is a model of the modern type of locks and dams they'd like to see built on the Mississippi, where many of the dams are more than 70 years old.

Most of those on the barge — specially outfitted for passengers with covered seating — simply stopped listening to the featured speakers when the boat entered the Newburgh locks, as approximately 15 million gallons of water poured in to raise the water level. The river is about 15 to 16 feet higher on the east side of the dam, which keeps the river open to navigation.

The National Corn Growers have been trying to get federal funding for newer dams on the Mississippi River, where most of the locks are just 600 feet long. That isn't long enough to accommodate a full, 15-barge tow. The locks at the Newburgh Dam, built in 1971, are 1,200 feet long, big enough to allow for the largest river traffic.

According to Garry Niemeyer, the Director of the National Corn Growers Association, similar barge tours have been conducted on the Mississippi River for 12 years. It is a way to make sure the public knows that river barges are by far the most economical way to transport corn.

Other speakers included Alcoa's Sally Rideout-Lambert and Brad Mulzer of Mulzer Crushed Stone. Both of them pointed out that the river transports things other than crops, including raw materials, quarried stone and construction equipment.

Two cruises were held on Monday, with one in the morning and another in the afternoon. Farmers from a 90-mile radius of Newburgh were invited, and the trip was also opened to the public. Both tours were nearly filled to capacity.