

TAMPA TRIBUNE

18 • NATION/WORLD • SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4, 2003 • THE TAMPA TRIBUNE • TBO.com

OUR OPINION

Washington Should Repair Inland Waterways System

If a person in Tampa contemplates the transportation infrastructure, he is likely to think about jammed roads or airline security. But also of importance is the inland waterways network.

The Mississippi River and its great tributaries, the Missouri and Ohio rivers, make up a system of 194 locks, dams and ports.

The barges that regularly carry coal south to the Gulf of Mexico and east to the Port of Tampa are part of a mode of transportation critical to both national and local economies.

Today the nation's waterways, its first highways that for generations have moved bulk cargo in relative obscurity, are in need of a makeover. If the country fails to modernize the industry's infrastructure — the ports, locks, dams, loading facilities, terminals and docks — we will have needlessly damaged a transportation option that remains underused.

A lobbying group, Waterways Work!, set up by the barge industry, shippers and other advocates, argues that Americans should pay closer attention to their river system.

Water transportation moves 16 percent of the nation's freight for 2 percent of the freight cost, saving shippers and consumers more than \$7 billion annually.

Water transportation saves fuel and is easier on the environment. One jumbo barge has the capacity of 58 trucks or 15 railroad cars. One gallon of fuel can move one ton of cargo 522 miles by barge, 386 miles by rail and 59 miles by

truck.

Moreover, transportation by water is safer: Bulk commodities like coal, grain, petroleum products, petrochemicals and steel moved by water reduce highway congestion and accidents.

The good news is that half the money available to pay for upkeep has already been paid by industry into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which today has a \$412 million surplus. Unfortunately, neither the Bush nor the Clinton administration has chosen to spend the money, instead preferring budget trickery to keep it on the books.

In 1986 Congress enacted cost-sharing legislation in which the barge companies agreed to pay a 20-cent-per-gallon diesel fuel tax into the trust fund, and the government promised to match the costs of modernizing. That hasn't happened since 1992, which has meant postponed projects and millions in benefits lost to taxpayers.

Barge industry representatives say they need \$150 million a year for the next decade to modernize the system. They are not complaining about paying the tax; they are complaining about paying to build a surplus when the money could be used to protect the industry's — and the nation's — interests.

Waterways don't have roadlike congestion, and a lock is not an airport gate, but continuing an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude isn't smart. It's time Washington used the money it has socked away to maintain the inland waterways system.