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EDITORIALS

# Keep waterways working

Barges glide down the Cumberland River every day, yet many Nashvillians may be unaware of the importance of barge traffic to interstate commerce and the national economy.

Judging from the federal government's pilfering of the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, federal lawmakers are equally unaware of the need to keep barge traffic rolling.

In 1986, Congress created the trust fund as a way to keep locks, dams and inland ports in good repair. The idea was a win-win: Barge and tugboat owners would pay a 20-cent-per-gallon diesel tax into the fund. The tax money would pay for about half of the renovation, repair and construction on inland waterways. General revenue would pay the rest. The fund now contains more than \$400 million from private companies. The law establishing the fund, however, requires Congress to appropriate spending from the fund annually.

And there's the rub. For the last several years, Congress and the White House have used the waterways trust fund to help reduce the nation's deficit — at least on paper. Money that was supposed to go to the maintenance of the dams and locks has gone unspent. The result is a waterways system that is suffering from delayed maintenance. According to the barge industry, half of the 276 operational locks in the nation are over 50 years old. Many locks are too small to accommodate larger tows.

What is so irritating about this par-

## When barge traffic slows down at an inadequate lock, nation's economy suffers

ticular book-cooking episode is that the economy will pay the price. So will the environment. So will motorists who contend with highway congestion. So will consumers when the cost of goods increases.

Barge and tugboat transit account for about 16% of all inter-city freight. One large barge can move 1,500 tons of material: 58 trucks, or 15 railroad cars would be needed for the same job. Barges aren't nearly as polluting or as dangerous as other means of transport. But when a multi-barge tow has to be broken apart in order to go through an old lock, transit time and cost escalate.

Congress is now debating this year's allocation from the trust fund. The Senate wants to allocate \$132 million, while the House wants to allocate \$116 million. The barge industry urges a \$150 million allocation.

Congress needs to honor the agreement implicit in the Inland Waterways Trust Fund by allocating \$150 million. After all, that money was contributed by the barge industry not only for its own benefit but also for the benefit of the economy. Given the barge industry's presence in Nashville and Tennessee, state lawmakers should fight vigorously for the effort. ■