

# CAPITOL CURRENTS



December 22, 2025

## WATERWAYS MOVE CARGO, BUT YOUR VOICE CAN MOVE CONGRESS

By Tracy Zea, President/CEO, Waterways Council, Inc.



Tracy Zea

**W**hat a year it's been in our Nation's capital and within the U.S. legislative process. To review: Within the 119th Congress that began on January 3, 2025, just 47 laws have been passed to date. By comparison, the 118th Congress (2023-25) enacted 274 public laws, the 117th Congress (2021-

2023) enacted 365, the 116th Congress (2019-21) enacted 344, and the 115th (2017-2019) enacted 443.

We experienced the longest government shutdown in history, from October 1 through November 12, 2025, 43 long days for federal employees.

The government is currently operating on a Continuing Resolution (CR) for FY26 funding that lasts through January 30, 2026. At press time, the House and Senate would need to pass nine appropriations bills between now and the end of January. This is unlikely, which portends another CR, an omnibus bill or a series of minibus bills that package appropriations bills together for passage. Fraught with challenges and obstacles, this is not an efficient way to fund the government and assess specific needs of agencies or programs.

For the inland waterways, if a full-year CR is enacted and direction to fund earmarks in the base appropriations bills is not included, the Office of Management & Budget (OMB) would likely dictate where funding will go for federal programs, including the Corps' Civil Works program. The consequences of this were seen in last year's full-year CR where OMB funded a major rehabilitation project inconsistent with the Capital Investment Strategy.

All together, these issues underscore, perhaps now more than ever before, the critical importance of WCI members coming to Washington, DC to advocate with our collective voice for the

modernization, reliability, and efficient delivery of lock and dam infrastructure on our Nation's inland waterways.

American democracy and civic engagement only work if The People participate; if they do not, decisions are made by smaller,

Continued on page 2

### IN THIS ISSUE:

- 2 **Legislator Profile: Senator Mitch McConnell**
- 5 **WCI Announces Corps Process Delivery Improvement Study**
- 6 **Member Spotlight: WKCTC Workforce & Marine Way Training Center**
- 8 **Inland Waterways Employment Study Released**
- 9 **Conservation Column: Navigating Army Readiness with the USACE**
- 12 **WCI Holds Annual Symposium in Nashville**

# WATERWAYS MOVE CARGO, BUT YOUR VOICE CAN MOVE CONGRESS

Continued from page 1



*WCI's Capitol Hill Fly-In on February 4, 2026, will give members a chance to meet with Members of Congress and their staff to educate them on the needs of the inland waterways system and our WRDA 2026 request.*

unrepresentative entities that weaken what is most important to us. Congressional officials, elected by the people, respond to those who show up and make them (and their staff) aware of challenges and opportunities to address public needs, especially on complex issues that WCI advocates for like transportation, agriculture, energy, global trade, and the economy.

Every two years WCI has an opportunity to influence public policy through the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), the legislative vehicle for authorizations in

Congress for the inland waterways and water resources issues. WRDA will come forward in 2026, so we will have another chance to talk directly to authorizers in Congress to advance smart, sound policy for inland infrastructure.

WCI's 2026 Capitol Hill Fly-In will be held February 4, 2026, with legislative meetings in the House and Senate with members and their staff. WCI will present our Leadership Service Award to a member of Congress to thank them for their stewardship of the inland waterways. We will also present our 2026 Waterways Counsel Award to Eddie Belk, former Corps' Director of Civil Works, who has been stalwart in his support and partnership with WCI over his years of service.

Register for the WCI meeting [here](#) and exercise your/our voice, your/our responsibility, and your/our privilege to enhance our inland waterways system and all that it provides to the Nation, to your business, and to your quality of life.

Tomorrow begins today and the time is NOW.

Thank you. ❖

## LEGISLATOR PROFILE: SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL (R-KY)



Senator Mitch McConnell

Continued on page 3

### BIOGRAPHICAL FACTS

**Name**

Mitch McConnell

**Born**

February 20, 1942

**Occupation**

From 1968 to 1970 Mitch McConnell was a legislative assistant to U.S. Sen. Marlow Cook. He later served as deputy assistant U.S. attorney general in the administration of Pres. Gerald R. Ford (1974–75) and as judge/executive (chief judge) of Jefferson County, Kentucky (1978–85). He was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1984, becoming the first Republican since 1968 to win a statewide election in Kentucky.

**Education**

University of Louisville with a B.A. in political science in 1964 with honors, and the University of Kentucky Law School in 1967

## LEGISLATOR PROFILE: SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL (R-KY)

Continued from page 2



*Senator McConnell receives WCI's 2018 Leadership Service Award from WCI member Steve Little in recognition of the Senator's commitment to the Nation's inland waterways system.*

**Q: On three occasions, TIME Magazine named you one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. You received Waterways Council, Inc.'s Leadership Service Award in 2018 for championing the inland waterways. And as the longest-serving Senator from Kentucky and longest-serving Senate Party Leader in American history, you have long fought for Kentucky's – and the Nation's – inland waterways system, its many beneficiaries, and its infrastructure. Describe why this system is so critical, and how you think about legislation when seeking ways to improve the system to increase U.S. competitiveness in the world marketplace?**

A: America's inland waterways system is a cornerstone of our nation's economic strength—and in Kentucky, it supports more than 20,000 maritime jobs. The Commonwealth also has more miles of navigable inland waterways than any state in the continental United States. I've long recognized the critical role this industry plays, not just in moving our nation's commerce, but in strengthening supply chains, supporting local economies, and maintaining our global competitiveness. That's why I've consistently worked to secure federal investments for ongoing key infrastructure projects – like the Kentucky Lock and Dam and others across our inland system – and that completed the Olmsted Lock and Dam project. These projects are essential to modernizing the aging network of locks and dams that so many operators, shippers, and producers rely on every day. Inland waterways in Kentucky and across the country are essential for transporting bulk goods—such as agricultural products and coal—helping drive local economies and keeping costs down for American consumers.

**Q: You announced that you will not seek re-election and will leave office in 2027 after serving four decades. What has been your most gratifying achievement(s) while serving in Congress, and what do you wish to be remembered for?**

A: Among the most significant and gratifying achievements of my tenure in Congress are my efforts to shape the federal judiciary – 3 Supreme Court Justices, 53 U.S. Circuit Court Judges – and to secure substantial federal investments for the Commonwealth of Kentucky. I consider the work to reshape the federal courts one of the most consequential undertakings of my time in the Senate, with far-reaching and enduring impact on the nation's legal landscape.

Equally important to me has been advocating for Kentucky. As a senior member of the Appropriations Committee, I've delivered billions of federal dollars to support our state – strengthening our universities, supporting our servicemembers at military installations, improving transportation infrastructure, and addressing the opioid crisis. I've also been a steadfast advocate for our farmers, leading key legislative efforts on their behalf.

**Q: What do you expect to focus on in the last year and a half while in office?**

A: I still have plenty to do, but my focus has narrowed. I want to use my remaining time in office to make sure the Congress invests in our national defense and provides the resources our armed forces need to deter our adversaries' aggression. When you're in a leadership role, you're deeply involved in everyone's

Continued on page 4



*Senator McConnell makes remarks in August 2018 at the dedication and opening of the Olmsted Locks and Dam on the Ohio River, a world-class navigation project he long championed.*

# LEGISLATOR PROFILE: SENATOR MITCH MCCONNELL (R-KY)

Continued from page 3



*In 2022, the Senator welcomed to his office in the U.S. Capitol then-Army Corps of Engineers' Chief of Engineers Lt. Gen. Scott Spellmon to discuss the progress of the Kentucky Lock addition project.*

lives – their policy goals, political ambitions, and helping them navigate tough decisions, and often taking the heat yourself. I'm no longer in that position, and that has allowed me to concentrate on the areas where I believe I can have the most meaningful impact – namely, defense and foreign policy.

Today, we're facing an increasingly hostile coalition of adversaries – North Korea, China, Russia, Iran, and their proxies. These regimes differ in many ways, but they share one important characteristic: they are united in their hostility toward the United States. And when it comes to our national preparedness, we are simply not where we need to be.

Take Ukraine, for example. Our objective should be to prevent the conflict from ending with the headline: 'Russia wins, America loses.' The consequences of that outcome would reverberate far beyond Eastern Europe – it would signal a profound weakening of American resolve and influence worldwide.

Critics often question the financial cost of supporting Ukraine. But it is vital to recognize that nearly half of the funds spent have fueled American industry, including in 38 states and right here in Kentucky. We've sent older weapons to Ukraine, while simultaneously modernizing our own defense infrastructure.

Supporting Ukraine isn't just about helping another country—it's about protecting America's interests and keeping us safe in a dangerous world. That's why this is where I'm focusing my energy.

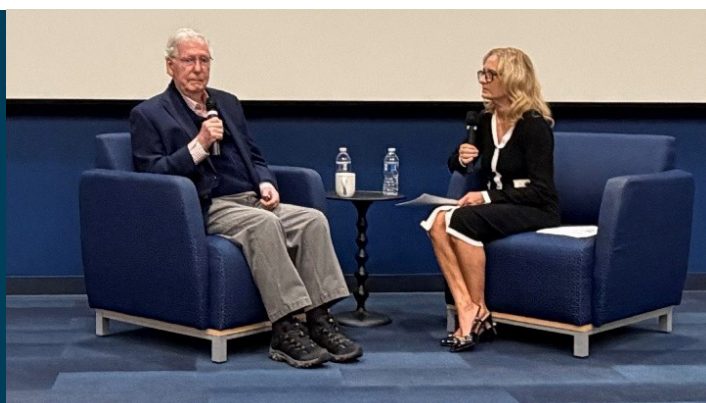
## **Q: What are some activities and hobbies you enjoy now and plan to do more of, post-retirement?**

A: I'm an avid college football fan and plan to continue attending all the home games for my alma mater, the University of Louisville –I really enjoy the energy and community spirit. Off the field, my sights are on another love besides politics – education. The non-partisan McConnell Center at the University of Louisville identifies, recruits, and nurtures Kentucky's next generation of leaders in providing 40 undergraduate UofL students tuition and travel scholarships. Instead of our state exporting talent to universities nationwide, the goal is to keep the brightest, high-quality students in Kentucky. The McConnell Scholars program is not limited to future politicians, we've had pre-med, pre-law students and even music majors – there are a lot of ways to be a good citizen that don't involve running for office. By the time they leave UofL, these students participate in the political process, and they make a difference by exercising leadership skills in whatever field they choose.

The McConnell Center also hosts a public lecture series each semester that invites influential political leaders, business executives and accomplished scholars to UofL. So far there have been 67 speakers ranging from President George W. Bush to Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and Colin Powell to four Supreme Court Justices, including Chief Justice John Roberts.

Additionally post-retirement, I plan to dedicate even more time to reading—it's a great way to relax and keep my mind active. I've always enjoyed spending time reading, whether it's diving into biographies, exploring history, or keeping up with current events. Overall, I'm just looking forward to continuing the things I love – reading, watching football and baseball, and of course, politics. ❖

*On November 13, WCI Senior Vice President Deb Calhoun participated in a fireside chat with Senator Mitch McConnell at Seamen's Church Institute in Paducah, KY. Given Senator McConnell's announced retirement from the Senate on January 3, 2027, the event highlighted his strong support of the inland waterways, his plans in the last year-and-a-half of his term, and his view of how things have changed in Congress from his service in 1985 to 2025. Senator McConnell is the longest serving Senator in Kentucky history and the longest-serving Senate party leader in American history.*



# WCI COMMISSIONS STUDY ON WAYS TO IMPROVE CORPS' PROJECT DELIVERY, EFFICIENCY

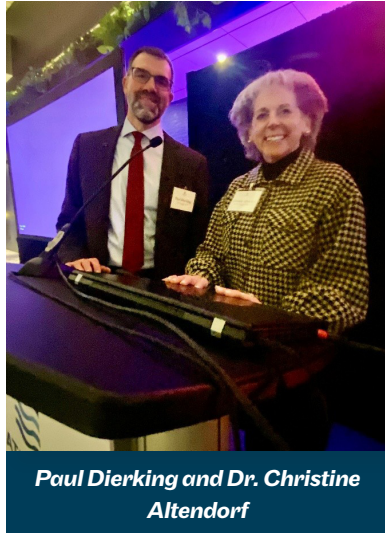
By Jen Armstrong, Vice President, Government Relations, Waterways Council, Inc.



America's lock and dam infrastructure has been slow to modernize over the past 40 years. Since 1987, only 10 projects to modernize or expand locks on the inland

system have been completed. Seven of those projects were started and finished between 1987 and 1997 with an average cost overrun of 33%. What the Corps of Engineers was able to accomplish in those ten years is in stark contrast to the 28 years since, which has seen the completion of only two modernization projects. The Olmsted Locks and Dam, opened in 2018, took 26 years to complete with a cost increase of 275% from its original authorized cost. More concerning, other legacy projects - those that began before enactment of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021- are performing even worse than Olmsted in terms of cost and completion schedule.

For years, inadequate or uncertain annual funding was cited as the primary cause of cost overruns and schedule delays, with the belief that full upfront funding would mitigate many of these risks. While having all funds in hand for a project is ideal, the reality of securing such funding for active construction projects in a regular appropriations cycle is unlikely given the magnitude of lock and dam construction coupled with an annual construction budget that must compete with other business lines of the Corps. What has become clear since the infusion of \$2.9 billion from IIJA, is that execution



Paul Dierking and Dr. Christine Altendorf

challenges extend beyond funding.

As costs continue to escalate, delaying the economic benefits from their completion, WCI sought the expertise of Corps subject matter experts at HDR, Inc. for recommendations on improving the delivery of inland waterway capital projects. The study employed a multi-faceted approach, including interviews with customers of the Corps and other relevant entities to obtain perspectives on improving the delivery of lock and dam projects. In addition, HDR conducted comprehensive background research and broader analyses of the systemic challenges associated with delivering large-scale infrastructure projects within established timeframes and budgets.

Treating the inland navigation waterways as a system, versus a series of individual projects, was the top recommendation of the study. Managing the system holistically ensures consistency with the Capital Investment Strategy (CIS), the ability to effectively apply lessons learned across projects, and an awareness of how challenges at one project can, and very often do, impact other projects within the portfolio. Within this theme, the study also recommended the Corps create a centralized program management office for the inland waterways. Other technical improvements recommended for Corps Headquarters include improving cost estimating and value engineering; using standard designs for locks and dams where possible; expanding site investigation efforts; using 3D modeling and conducting constructability reviews; and centralizing competencies and deepening the Corps' knowledge base.

The study's findings reveal that most of the recommendations that can reasonably be implemented by the Corps require support and approval from the Office of Management and Budget (OMB). It spotlights the consequences of OMB's interpretation of Executive Order

Continued on page 6

# WCI COMMISSIONS STUDY ON WAYS TO IMPROVE CORPS' PROJECT DELIVERY, EFFICIENCY

Continued from page 5

12322 (EO) and how it limits access to effective solutions such as continuing contracts and alternative delivery methods that provide considerable opportunity to improve execution and reduce risks. Other key recommendations, such as following the CIS and taking a systemic approach with programmatic funding, also require buy-in from OMB. WCI is pleased with the depth and clarity provided in the study's recommendations as it serves as a valuable resource

for educating key decision makers. The analysis underscores the complexity of challenges facing lock and dam project delivery and highlights the importance of collaboration and alignment among the Corps, industry, Congress, and the Administration. WCI will continue to support and implement workable solutions that improve project execution and reliability of the inland waterways system. ❖

## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: WKCTC WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS & THE MARINE WAY TRAINING CENTER



 <p><b>WEST KENTUCKY COMMUNITY &amp; TECHNICAL COLLEGE</b></p>	<p><b>WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS</b> CUSTOMIZED EMPLOYEE TRAINING</p> <p>Emerging Technology Center Room 133 5100 Alben Barkley Drive P.O. Box 7380 Paducah, KY 42002</p>	<p><b>MARINE WAY TRAINING CENTER</b> </p> <p>631 Marine Way Paducah, KY 42003</p>
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At West Kentucky Community & Technical College (WKCTC), the Workforce Solutions division continues to strengthen its connection to the maritime industry by helping meet one of its greatest needs: a skilled, well-trained workforce.

Through its designation as a MARAD Center of Excellence for Domestic Maritime Workforce Training and Education, WKCTC's Workforce Solutions Marine Way Training Center in Paducah, Kentucky, provides hands-on training, certification, and workforce development designed around what employers and mariners need to succeed on the inland waterways.

### A MARAD Center of Excellence

The Center of Excellence (CoE) designation from the U.S. Maritime Administration recognizes colleges that meet the highest standards for maritime training. To receive



WKCTC offers Marine Fire Fighting Basic and Advanced courses.

this recognition, programs must meet U.S. Coast Guard and MARAD curriculum standards, have strong industry partnerships, and provide training environments that closely mirror real-world conditions.

WKCTC's Workforce Solutions Marine Way Training Center meets those expectations through its combination of applied

Continued on page 7

## WCI MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: WKCTC WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS & THE MARINE WAY TRAINING CENTER

Continued from page 6



*WKCTC plays an important role in training the next generation of skilled mariners for the inland waterways.*

instruction, real-life simulation, and close collaboration with barge lines, ports, and industry partners. The designation is more than a credential; it is an acknowledgment of the role WKCTC plays in developing the next generation of skilled mariners who keep America's inland waterways moving.

### **Industry-Aligned Training for Every Level**

WKCTC's Workforce Solutions Marine Way Training Center offers a full range of U.S. Coast Guard-approved courses designed to support safety and compliance across the inland marine industry. Current and upcoming courses include:

- RADAR Observer Rivers, Inland, and Unlimited
- Marine Fire Fighting (Basic and Advanced)
- Tankerman (online delivery)
- Coming Soon: Steersman and Train-the-Trainer

Each program focuses on the practical skills that make daily operations safer and more efficient, whether that is understanding radar navigation, managing fire emergencies, or leading deck teams.

### **Expanding Skill Development Across the Industry**

In addition to its Coast Guard-approved classes, Workforce Solutions provides training developed directly with industry partners to meet specific needs. These include Deckhand Training, Deck Leadership, Safety and Compliance, Vessel Cook Training, Rose pointe, Confined Space Entry, High Angle Safety Training, and Shipyard Competent Person certification.

The division also designs customized courses for companies seeking to advance the technical skills of their crews and maintenance teams. Examples include a Marine Diesel course

built in partnership with vessel operators to support vessel inspectors and maintenance personnel, and a short-term Marine Electrical course that introduces participants to the basics of onboard electrical systems.

New courses continue to evolve based on industry feedback. A Marine Welding course is being launched to train welders for dry dock and repair operations, supported by AWS certification testing offered both on-site and on campus. A Machinist course has been developed to teach the precision skills used in shipbuilding and repair.

Recognizing the growing importance of digital safety, Vessel Cybersecurity training is now in development to help companies and crews protect onboard systems and prepare for upcoming U.S. Coast Guard standards that will establish new cybersecurity requirements across the maritime industry.

Training is offered on-site, on-campus, or virtually, allowing companies to schedule programs around vessel movement and crew availability, a flexibility that has become essential for today's maritime workforce.

### **Standing Beside WCI in Building the Workforce**

As technology, automation, and workforce challenges continue to shape the maritime industry, WKCTC Workforce Solutions shares common ground with Waterways Council, Inc. (WCI) in advocating for continued investment in people, the true foundation of industry success.

"Partnering with WCI gives us a stronger voice to emphasize just how critical a well-trained workforce is to the safety, strength, and competitiveness of the inland waterways industry," said Ashley Burns, Director of Workforce Solutions. "When we invest in people through quality training and career development, we are not just filling jobs; we are building careers, reducing turnover, improving safety, and ultimately strengthening the industry that drives our Nation's economy."

Through this partnership, WKCTC's Workforce Solutions stands with WCI in advocating for increased funding and policy support for workforce development and training programs that serve the inland waterways system.

By combining technical expertise, flexibility, and a deep connection to the industry, WKCTC's Workforce Solutions is helping ensure the inland waterways continue to have the

**Continued on page 8**

# WCI MEMBER SPOTLIGHT: WKCTC WORKFORCE SOLUTIONS & THE MARINE WAY TRAINING CENTER

Continued from page 7

skilled workforce needed to meet current and future demands. The center's efforts go beyond compliance training; they focus on creating long-term career pathways, improving safety, and supporting economic growth across the river system.

As the industry continues to evolve, WKCTC's commitment remains clear: to provide accessible, high-quality training that supports the people, the companies, and the communities that keep America's waterways moving. ❖



Visit WKCTC's Website



WKCTC Workforce Solutions on Facebook



For Ease of Contact or to Request More Information, please fill out this form

# NATIONAL WATERWAYS FOUNDATION RELEASES NEW EMPLOYMENT STUDY BY TEXAS TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE



The National Waterways Foundation (NWF) has released its latest study, "Evaluating Employment by Inland Waterways Operators," by the Center for Ports and Waterways Texas A&M Transportation Institute.

Supply chain disruptions since the COVID-19 pandemic have intensified focus on transportation workforce availability and employment conditions. This study examines employment characteristics in the inland waterways industry, comparing it to the rail and trucking sectors, while quantifying the economic impact of inland waterways jobs to the national economy. Additionally, an educational toolkit was created, highlighting the advantages of working in the inland waterways industry.

As part of the study, an employment survey was developed and sent to waterways operators as the first task. Responses included data on job positions, duty cycle, educational attainment, and geographic location. The survey results showed that positions generally required a high school

education, and typical lengths of employment for non-entry level positions were over 10 years.

Geographically, workers resided in 29 states, with the highest concentrations along the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway (GIWW), and the Mississippi and Ohio River basins. Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas were the states with the highest concentration of inland waterways workers surveyed.



The study also compared inland waterways employment to the trucking and rail sectors. Compared to trucking and rail jobs, waterways jobs require no prior experience, offer advancement based on merit, provide the opportunity to acquire additional certifications, and offer reliable scheduling of work periods. The trucking sector currently faces a critical driver shortage, high turnover rates, irregular work schedules, and health issues arising from the sedentary nature of the job. Railroad jobs have similar

Continued on page 9

# NATIONAL WATERWAYS FOUNDATION RELEASES NEW EMPLOYMENT STUDY BY TEXAS TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE

Continued from page 8

issues with irregular, unpredictable work schedules, and have faced significant reductions in the workforce in recent years.

This report found that compared to trucking and rail, inland waterways employment offered several advantages, including safety, compensation, work-life balance, and job security. Inland waterway transportation is significantly safer than rail or trucking, with 1/25th the fatalities of rail operations, and 1/120th the fatalities of trucking operations. Median compensation for inland waterway transportation jobs exceeds trucking wages and is near rail wages, while offering a more predictable work schedule, with lower turnover. The sector also offers job security as these jobs cannot easily be automated, and demand for these positions is expected to continue to grow in the future.

Next, an IMPLAN based economic impact analysis was conducted to determine the impacts of waterways employment on the national economy. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data including employment numbers and wages were used as inputs into the IMPLAN model. The results showed that inland waterways jobs have a total economic output, including direct, indirect, and induced impacts, of \$36.1 billion annually, contribute \$10.2 billion to labor income, and support 127,500 jobs. Additionally, inland waterways employment contributes \$4.2 billion in tax revenue nationally.

A video and a brochure highlighting the advantages of working in the inland waterway industry were also developed to complement the study. These educational materials can be distributed to middle and high school students who may be interested in a career in the industry. The brochure highlights the advantages of an inland waterways career, job duties associated with different positions, potential compensation for these positions, as well as typical career progression paths. A five-minute video was created to showcase these topics and includes interviews with a current barge company executive and a towboat captain.

Ultimately, this report found that inland waterways employment offers several advantages over similar jobs in the trucking and rail industries including competitive wages, safer work environments, and predictable work schedules. The industry generates substantial economic benefits nationally while providing entry level positions that can develop into skilled careers without requiring a college degree. The educational toolkit developed alongside this report will provide educators and parents with the tools needed to explain the advantages of a career in the industry, helping these critical jobs to remain staffed in the future.

Find the study [here](#). ❖

## CONSERVATION COLUMN: NAVIGATING READINESS - HOW USACE WATERWAYS KEEP THE ARMY MOVING

Reprinted from [The Corps Environment, Volume 26, Issue 3 Summer 2025, page 46.](#)

By Kathryne Gest, USACE Headquarters

When the U.S. Army’s 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) needs to move more than 1,000 trucks, trailers and tons of equipment for a large training exercise, it relies on the cost-effectiveness and convenience of the nation’s waterways.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) maintains an extensive network of inland and intracoastal waterways

that play a critical role in supporting military operations. By facilitating the movement of more than 400 million tons of military and commercial cargo annually, USACE sustains the readiness and effectiveness of warfighters across the nation.

Last month, Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 1st Mobile Brigade Combat Team used USACE-managed inland waterways to move their equipment from

Continued on page 10

# CONSERVATION COLUMN: NAVIGATING READINESS - HOW USACE WATERWAYS KEEP THE ARMY MOVING

Continued from page 9



*Equipment from the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault), 1st Mobile Brigade Combat Team staged at Central Louisiana Regional Port Hardstand waits to transit to Fort Polk, Louisiana, for training in 2022. Since 2018, the 101st has conducted 10 Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) barge movements with the support of USACE-managed inland waterways to move their equipment by barge from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to the JRTC at Fort Polk, Louisiana. (Courtesy Photo)*

Fort Campbell, Kentucky, by barge on the Cumberland, Ohio, Mississippi and Red rivers to the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, Louisiana.

This safer, much more cost-effective route underscores the importance of navigable waterways to national defense and military readiness.

“Moving (equipment) by barge is more cost efficient, a more reliable method overall, more convenient and less cumbersome on the Soldier,” said Curtis Clark, division transportation chief for the 101st. “Rail cars usually take about a week to load, with a lot of chaining down and restrictions, but with a barge, we can load the same amount of equipment in fewer days and take just about anything.”

“Our mission is to maintain a 9-foot channel ready for any user, whether it’s commercial or military,” said Kristopher “KC” Ellis, chief of Navigation for USACE’s Monroe, Louisiana, Project Office. “This system is reliable, and that’s by design.”

The Monroe Navigation Project Office oversees nine locks and dams on the Ouachita-Black and J. Bennett Johnston waterways. A lock raises or lowers vessels to the next section of river depending on its elevation.

“The lock acts like an elevator to the next pool level,” said Ellis. “You raise the pool high enough and build the lock

to provide that 9-foot channel. Then you’re basically stair-stepping up the river to maintain that consistent depth, in this case over 90 miles.”

These inland routes are widely used to move commercial cargo such as aggregate, grain and fuel, but they’re also vital for military movements like the 101st.

As the 101st equipment passed through two locks on its way to Fort Polk, USACE teams worked behind the scenes to ensure reliable passage. This included managing sediment buildup – especially on sediment-heavy rivers like the Red River Waterway – performing preventive maintenance and adjusting operations as needed.

“During a previous rotation, we had a lock dewatering underway. We worked with the military and port authorities to identify alternate routes and options where the rotation would not be held up,” said Ellis. “Although it was a different unloading scenario, it still saved time and money and kept the mission on track.”

Since 2018, the 101st has conducted 10 Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC) barge movements with the support of USACE, each one building on prior lessons learned to improve the process.

“I’ve been here 18 years, and each time we’ve used the waterway, it’s improved with every iteration,” said Clark. “Going from one load and offload area to three, and during this last iteration, high water from heavy rain meant we had to adjust our path, but each time we’ve expanded and are now able to stage even more equipment.”

Each successful movement along America’s waterways reinforces the strategic value of USACE infrastructure as a flexible, scalable option for military transport.

The 101st offloaded their equipment at the Central Louisiana Regional Port in Alexandria, Louisiana.

“This port is uniquely positioned as the only inland public port in the United States actively supporting the deployment of U.S. military equipment and personnel,” said Ben Russo, Central Louisiana Regional Port executive director. “This reflects our unwavering commitment to national defense readiness and the strategic advantage of using inland waterways for military logistics. As we look to the future,

Continued on page 11

# CONSERVATION COLUMN: NAVIGATING READINESS - HOW USACE WATERWAYS KEEP THE ARMY MOVING

Continued from page 10

we stand ready to adapt our capacity and capabilities to meet the congested and contested transportation challenges that lie ahead and to further establish ourselves as a projection platform for the U.S. Army.”

The 101st’s recent movement reflects a resurgence in the use of inland waterways as a strategic logistics option, made possible through USACE’s enduring navigation mission.

“It’s a very fluid process and better each time, and great that USACE allows us to use the waterway,” added Clark. “Other places and organizations are looking into moving equipment this way, and I would recommend it.”

As the Army modernizes its approach to large-scale readiness, the waterways USACE has maintained for more than two centuries continue to provide essential infrastructure that enables movement when and where it is needed most.

“Our partnership with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and other stakeholders ensures that these critical movements

are supported by reliable, well-maintained infrastructure, strengthening both national security and the economic vitality of the region,” said Russo.

Navigation is USACE’s earliest Civil Works mission, established by federal law in 1824 to improve safety on the Ohio and Mississippi rivers and several ports. Today, USACE’s navigation mission continues to evolve in support of national defense, economic strength and strategic mobility.

“Navigation is what we do,” said Ellis. “We might not be the ones loading the barges, but we have and maintain the infrastructure that makes this possible, and we will continue to support that.” As USACE marks its 250th anniversary this year, its navigation mission remains vital – ensuring navigable waterways are ready to support national security and strategic mobility across the nation. ❖

## WCI’S GEORGE LEAVELL IS DECEMBER’S ‘FIVE ON THE FIVE’ GUEST



GEORGE LEAVELL  
CEO, WEPFER GROUP, LLC

George Leavell, CEO of Wepfer Marine in Memphis, was the guest for [December’s ‘Five on the Five’](#) interview. A member of WCI’s Board of Directors and a long-time member of WCI, Mr. Leavell is also the prestigious 2025 River Bell Award recipient.

In his interview, he discusses what it means to receive the award, how he got into the waterways business, and his recent golf grudge match against Tracy Zea.

# WCI HOLDS ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP/ BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS, AND ANNUAL WATERWAYS SYMPOSIUM IN NASHVILLE

**O**n December 9-10, WCI held its Annual Membership and Board of Directors Meetings and its 22nd Annual Waterways Symposium at the Loews Vanderbilt Hotel in Music City, Nashville, TN.

This year's meeting dates allowed participants to travel to Paducah for the annual River Bell Awards, sponsored by Seamen's Church Institute (SCI) (see photos page 16).

The events began on December 8 with an opening reception at the hotel.

The Annual Membership meeting and Board of Directors Meeting began on December 9 where Chairman Jeff Webb said "We are at a crucial moment for inland waterways infrastructure projects. It is time for the Waterways Council to lead the industry and its members forward with a long-term strategy that emphasizes accountability, responsibility, transparency, capability, productivity, and efficiency in the work of the Corps of Engineers."

The Waterways Symposium's Keynote Address was presented by David Wasserman, Senior Editor and Elections Analyst for *The Cook Report with Amy Walter*, who presented a "Roadmap to the 2026 Midterms and Beyond." Noting the culture gap that has grown in the U.S. from Administration to Administration, Wasserman humorously described it in terms of Whole Foods vs. Cracker Barrel shoppers/diners. Making no predictions for the upcoming midterms or Presidential election in 2028, he discussed gerrymandering that has moved from something done every 10 years "to every 10 minutes," the important role of governors who could push back hardest against tariffs and the impact on their states, and the status of consumer confidence in the current economy.

Next, Geopolitics Pundit Jacob Shapiro addressed the Geopolitical Importance of the U.S. Inland Waterways, noting that the Mississippi River is "the country's source of strength" which has allowed the creation of our national culture and connectiveness. But he said while the waterways are strategically essential they are economically invisible in



**WCI's Board gathered in Nashville at the Loews Vanderbilt Hotel for the Annual Meeting and election of WCI Directors, and Board meeting.**

value-based rankings because the U.S. built a bulk flow river economy feeding coastal gateways rather than inland river terminals.

He said the world is now multi-polar, with no one country dominant as opposed to the Cold War era bipolarity when the U.S. and Soviet Union were the world's powerhouses. The U.S. is employing unipolar policies in a multi-polar world, he said, and the world is deglobalizing but there is more trade integration. "We used to be defined by exports, but not anymore," he noted, as the U.S. imports more food than it exports and other countries are buying less from the U.S. due to price and politics.

Shapiro said we don't build anything in America anymore, we would need a warp speed effort to restore our shipbuilding capacity, China cannot be counted on as a viable market for U.S. companies, the U.S.-Europe relationship has been broken due to the Ukraine War, and Mexico is our largest trading partner and U.S. companies might even consider transporting U.S. products on Mexico's inland waterways system.

But Shapiro ended on a note of optimism by saying he is bullish on America, now is the time to invest, and there are still

**Continued on page 13**

# WCI HOLDS ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP/BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS, AND ANNUAL WATERWAYS SYMPOSIUM IN NASHVILLE

Continued from page 12

very solvable issues and challenges in the world that can bring out the best in Americans.

Next, Adam Sparger, Director, Transportation Economics Division, Agricultural Marketing Service, USDA, and Robin Wilkinson, Economist with the Department of Transportation's Volpe Center, presented a new USDA study "Economic Impact of the U.S. Inland Waterways to Agriculture" soon to be released. This study looks at the critical role of the inland waterways and improved lock and dam infrastructure to agricultural exports of corn, soybeans, wheat, and rice and sorghum, the detrimental impacts of a lock outage, and models through IMPLAN how economic activity from the inland waterways spreads throughout the system, from real estate to doctor's offices to restaurants in terms of direct, induced and induced effects, and furthers our U.S. GDP.

HDR's Paul Dierking and Dr. Christine Altendorf next presented their study for WCI, "Recommendations for Improving Inland Waterways Capital Projects Delivery," citing that only 1 in 200 large projects are actually delivered successfully in the United States. Over the last 30 years, only seven inland waterways projects have been constructed in less than eight years and within 33% of cost. Since the 1990s, only three have been constructed within 100% of cost. The Olmsted project took 26 years to complete and faced a 275% cost increase. According to the GAO, each year of a project delay in opening new locks is \$875 million

in foregone benefits to commercial barge traffic.

The HDR study, based on interviews with the Corps of Engineers, other federal and non-federal agencies and those with institutional knowledge, recommends rescinding the Reagan era Executive Order 12322 that requires the Office of Management and Budget to review all Corps Project which creates a bureaucratic bottleneck and further delays. It also

recommends that Congress provide programmatic funding for the inland waterways as a system rather than funding projects in individual Corps districts and divisions.

While the study outlines other areas of improvement for more efficient navigation project delivery, Dr. Altendorf said, "these things need to start happening or we will see catastrophic impacts on the inland waterways."

The Symposium continued on December 10, with a Corps of Engineers - Civil Works Update with Tab Brown, Director of the Corps' Projects Integration Division, along with Steve Hill, Director, Operations and Regulatory Programs. Mr. Brown, who has served the Corps for 40 years, provided the industry "state of play," noting that the inland waterways provide national prosperity and national security, but the number of closures is increasing, and navigation construction takes far longer than the 7-10 year schedule from the 1980s. He said Chief of Engineers General Butch Graham is focused on delivery, innovation and people to improve the process, and to "get the engineering right, get the business right and get the delivery right."

Of the new commitment to improved project delivery, Mr. Hill said he had never seen the Corps so broken as it is now, but



**Geopolitician Jacob Shapiro gave a blazing talk about where the U.S. stands in the world today, and the importance of the Mississippi River in making America strong.**



**The Cook Report's David Wasserman opened WCI's Annual Waterways Symposium as its Keynote Speaker, outlining the political landscape, often with levity.**

Continued on page 14

# WCI HOLDS ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP/BOARD OF DIRECTORS MEETINGS, AND ANNUAL WATERWAYS SYMPOSIUM IN NASHVILLE

Continued from page 13

that “there is never a better time for change than right now.”

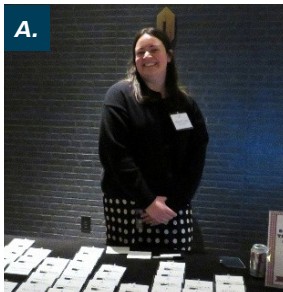
Ken Eriksen, Managing Member, Polaris Analytics and Consulting, provided an Economic Outlook: Global Supply Chain for Commodities Moving on the Inland Waterways, beginning by saying that while Dow Industrials are up, Dow Jones transport stocks are not appreciating and are plateauing because commodities are not moving at the same pace as in recent years, with the exception of crude oil pipelines. He said U.S. truck tonnage has also peaked and U.S. rail is also seeing a downward turn mostly due to reduced coal movements.

He described the “four Rs” of the U.S. commodity value chain: Reliable (the U.S. has an established integrated network); Resilient (there are many options); Resourceful

(it is efficient and has high volume throughput); and is Redundant (with a plug and participate system).

Kurt Strand, President and CEO of the National Mississippi River Museum & Aquarium, next highlighted past winners of the National Rivers Hall of Fame National Achievement Award. Jerry Enzler received the 2025 Achievement Award, and the 2026 National Achievement Award honoree will be announced in New Orleans in January.

The symposium concluded with closing remarks and thanks from Tracy Zea, WCI President and CEO, for the support of the sponsoring companies and the attendance from WCI members and participants. ❖



**Photo A:** WCI’s Operations Manager Miranda Lang handled every detail for a flawless meeting.

**Photo B:** WCI enjoys its partnership with Waterways Journal on the annual Waterways Symposium. Shown here with Tracy Zea (left) is Waterways Journal Publisher Nelson Spencer, Jr. (center) and editor Frank McCormack.

**Photo C:** Standing with WCI’s Jen Armstrong, Charles Brittingham, Executive Vice President at Cassidy & Associates, has joined WCI’s government relations outside lobby team.

**Photo D:** WCI Treasurer Chris Blanchard (Cooper Group) stands with WCI Executive Committee member Damon Judd (Marquette Transportation Co., LLC).

**Photo E:** Karl Berthelot, Regional Manager at Brennan Marine Inc., catches up with Cline Jones, Executive Director of the Tennessee River Valley Association, at the WCI reception.

**Photo F:** Kelly Teichman (T&T Marine) with Rev. Mark Nestlehutt (Seamen’s Church Institute) in Nashville.

**Photo G:** Matt Gresham, Vice President of Governmental Relations at the Port of New Orleans, connects with Spencer Murphy, Canal Barge, at WCI’s reception in Nashville.

**Photo H:** WCI Vice President–Midwest Paul Rohde (left), gets together with Sean Duffy, Big River Coalition (center), and Ken Eriksen (Polaris Analytics and Consulting, and Waterways Symposium Speaker).

# THANK YOU, WCI SPONSORS!

WCI thanks its generous members who sponsored the December meetings!

## PLATINUM



## GOLD



## SILVER



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# SCI HONORS LEAVELL, BARR AND HETTEL

The Seamen's Church Institute held its annual River Bell Awards Luncheon on Thursday, December 11, at the Paducah-McCracken County Convention and Expo Center in Paducah, KY. WCI offered its congratulations to the 2025 River Bell Awardees that include WCI members:

## River Bell Award

George G. Leavell, Wepfer Group, LLC  
(member of WCI's Board of Directors)

## River Legend Award

William R. Barr, Amherst Madison (WCI Member)

## Distinguished Service Award

Marty Hettel (former WCI Secretary and member of the Board and Executive Committee)

## Lifesaving Awards

The Crew of the *M/V Susan Robinson*, Crouse Corporation  
(WCI Member)

The Crew of the *Mary Moran*, Moran Towing of New Orleans



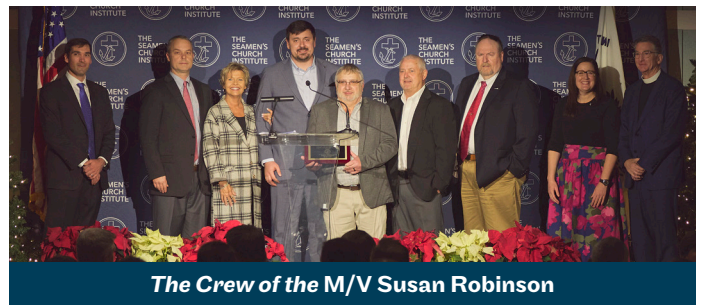
**George G. Leavell**



**Bill Barr**



**Marty Hettel**



**The Crew of the M/V Susan Robinson**



**The Crew of the Mary Moran**

# ANNUAL WATERWAYS PHOTO CONTEST HIGHLIGHTS THE MANY FACES OF THE WATERWAYS

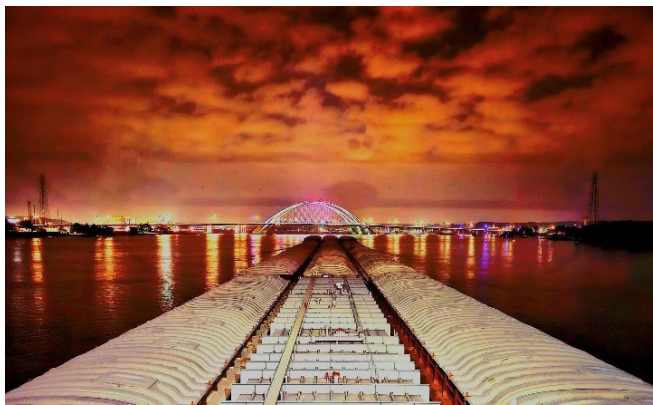
This year's "Faces of the Waterways" photo contest, sponsored by WCI, We Work the Waterways and *Waterways Journal* winners, saw the submission of more than 50 photos under the categories of Faces of the Community, Future, Commerce and Stewardship, and the finalists garnered nearly 500 votes. The winners, announced November 21, are:

**Faces of the Community:** *South Bound Bridge Approach 2am Memphis* by Tim Haman

**Faces of the Future:** *Helping Dad at Work* by Thomas Sullivan

**Faces of the Commerce:** *Sweat and Steel* by Steve Cross

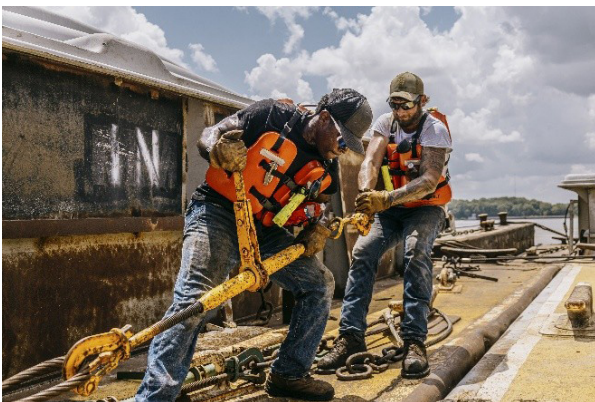
**Faces of the Stewardship:** *Evening Sunset* by Kelly Babin



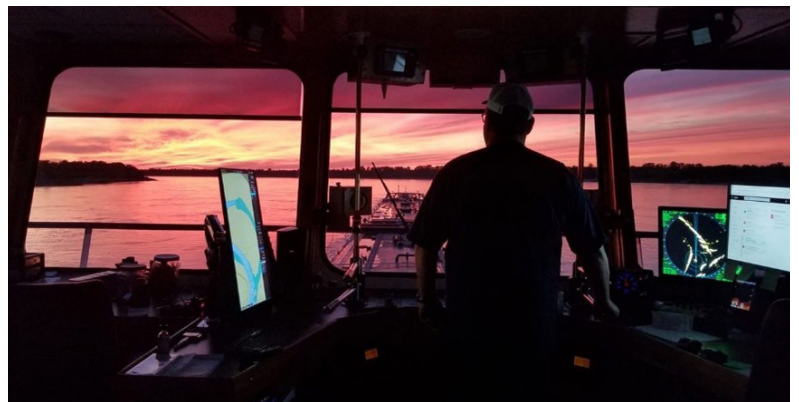
*South Bound Bridge Approach 2 a.m. Memphis*  
by Tim Haman



*Helping Dad at Work*  
by Thomas Sullivan



*Sweat and Steel*  
by Steve Cross



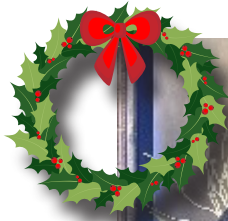
*Evening Sunset*  
by Kelly Babin

# WCI MOVES HEADQUARTERS OFFICE



In November, Waterways Council, Inc. relocated its headquarters office to 1100 New Jersey Avenue, SE, Suite 760, Washington, DC 20003. Our phone numbers remain the same. Please share this update with your colleagues.

Come visit us when in DC!



## HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

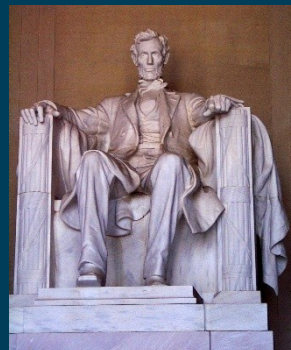
*We wish you a joyous holiday season and we thank you for your continued support this year!*

## 2026 INDUSTRY CALENDAR

### SAVE THE DATE:

**January 28:** Tennessee River Valley Association/Tennessee-Cumberland Waterways Annual Meeting (Murphreesboro, TN)

**February 3-5:** WCI Capitol Hill Fly-In, Washington, DC (Intercontinental Hotel, The Wharf)



*Washington, DC is the site of WCI's first Board of Directors meeting of the new year open to all members, February 3-5, that includes our annual Capitol Hill Fly-in.*

**February 18:** AWO Atlantic Region Annual Meeting (Baltimore, MD)

**February 24-26:** AWO Combined Regions Annual and Winter Safety Meeting (New Orleans, LA)

**March 10:** AWO Pacific Region Annual Meeting (Vancouver, WA)

**May 11-13:** AWO Spring Convention & Barge-In (Washington, DC)

**May 20-22:** Warrior-Tombigbee Waterway Association meeting (Orange Beach, AL)

**July 28-30:** AWO Summer Safety Meeting (Location TBD)

**August 5-7:** Gulf Intracoastal Canal Association (GICA) Annual Seminar/Conference (New Orleans, LA)

**August 12-14:** Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Conference (Point Clear, AL)

**October 14-15:** AWO Fall Convention (Location TBD)

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