

Could a construction authority modernize inland waterways?



Locks and Dam 13 on the Mississippi River at Fulton, Ill.

A new study by HDR, Inc., prepared for Waterways Council Inc. (WCI), is urging a major overhaul in how the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers delivers inland navigation projects. The report argues that decades of cost overruns and delays are driven by structural project management flaws — not technical or funding limitations.

In *Recommendations for Improving the Delivery of Inland Waterway Capital Projects*, HDR calls for the creation of an Inland Navigation Construction Organization (INCO) within Corps Headquarters. The proposed entity would manage modernization efforts as a coordinated national program, rather than as individual projects spread across districts that compete annually for funding and priority.

U.S. inland waterways move hundreds of millions of tons of cargo each year, supporting agriculture, energy and manufacturing. Yet much of the lock and dam infrastructure is more than 80 years old, and modernization has lagged. Only three major capital projects have been completed in the past 28 years, while others have faced significant cost growth and schedule delays.

The study points to fragmented oversight and funding structures as key challenges. Inland navigation projects are dispersed across multiple river systems and Corps divisions, limiting consistent management. Compounding

the issue is a hybrid funding model: major projects are funded 75% by general Treasury funds and 25% by the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, supported by a diesel fuel tax on commercial operators.

The Inland Waterways Users Board (IWUB) has, with the Corps, developed and recommended to Congress a long-term Capital Investment Strategy (CIS) to guide investment priorities for IWTF projects. However, the HDR study suggests that the CIS is not fully reflected in the Corps' annual project execution plan.

As a result, Congress often receives differing messages from the Corps and nonfederal partners regarding project priorities, which further complicates appropriations decisions and limits the impact of federal spending.

WCI is urging the Corps to establish the INCO and delegate a single Inland Program Manager under the authority of senior Corps leadership to coordinate funding priorities across major and mega inland navigation projects, conduct regular progress reviews of project scope, budget, and schedule, serve as the primary point of contact for Congress and the IWUB, and ensure alignment between long-term investment strategies and annual appropriations. This structure is modeled after existing Corps program organizations used for dam safety and military construction, which centralize oversight while allowing individual districts to retain responsibility for project delivery.

One of the key goals of this concept is to improve transparency and accountability, with the Inland Program Manager consolidating information across Corps Headquarters, divisions, districts, and design centers to reduce duplication and conflicting reporting. This will help identify risks earlier and provide lawmakers with more reliable information on project execution.

Given recent federal workforce reductions that have mitigated experience levels across the Corps, this proposal also highlights the importance of staff continuity and institutional knowledge.

This proposal would not change Congress's authority over appropriations, remove project delivery responsibility from Corps' districts and divisions, or require new statutory authority. Instead, it would coordinate existing functions under a clearer framework.

This framework is intended to guide discussions on the future of inland navigation project delivery, which must be improved. The time is NOW, as Congress continues to prioritize infrastructure investment and supply chain resiliency.

The U.S. requires efficient, modern inland waterways, and assurances that federal investments deliver results on time and within budget.



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