

Waterways

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Publication reminds readers: river affects everyone

As UMWA members get ready for season open in a few weeks, they're glad to see that recent winter storms have pushed up mid-Mississippi River levels. But that also means that the river's vital role in the nation's economy has been pushed out of the headlines.

River up 7 feet

The most problematic stretch from St. Louis, Mo., to Thebes, Ill., saw river gauges up by more than seven feet early this month. The higher flows enabled the Corps of Engineers to end its dredging operations in that stretch area and return dredges to their home ports for needed seasonal maintenance.

Corps statistics show that the two dredges from Memphis and St. Louis moved more than 8 million cubic yards of material through the fall and winter, about twice the normal amount.

But even though the river was off the front pages and

newscasts, the *National Geographic Daily News* has been telling its readers about how the shrinking river affected river operators, farmers and ultimately every American.

National Geographic told readers that, "Barges lose about a hundred tons of ca-

risk of not reaching their destination in December and January.

Joe Kellett, deputy district engineer at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' St. Louis District was quoted as saying, "One of the effects is that farmers on the middle

Mississippi, the drought-strapped area, are paying a dollar more to ship each bushel of crops than are farmers on the lower Mississippi, who can fully load barges before sending them down the river."

National Geographic then told readers how the problem affects everyone. "If you live in the United States and many other parts of the world, the Missis-

sippi carries an awful lot of stuff you use every day—corn, cement, coal, and crude oil, among other things. And the Mississippi is more central on the world stage than those who don't live beside it realize."

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Above: The recent drought has made more people aware of the importance of river commerce

capacity for each 6 inches (15 centimeters) less deep they can sink in the water."

\$7 billion at risk

The story then quoted the American Waterways Operators report that more than \$7 billion worth of goods was at

From the Executive Director...

“...The result is that more and more we don’t even get the same essential facts or headlines...”

Spaghetti on the Wall

“Throw garbage against a wall and what ever sticks must be true” seems to be the mantra of a large part of today’s culture. From childhood on, we’re often told that “...if it’s in the paper, it must be so”. Update that to include emails, commercials, TV and the internet and you profoundly change the outcome.

This expanded mantra, observed political author Peggy Noonan, leads to disjointed facts because “we no longer share the same information.” If you want to hear that Iraq was a great success, you went to FOX. If you wanted to hear that generals in the Pentagon were rebelling against White House leadership, you went to CNN. If you wanted a full accounting of George Bush’s greatness, you went straight to one cable show; or, if you wanted to know the enormity of his failures, you went to another, she said.

More than that, Noonan continued, because the big three networks and established broadsheets were the only games in town, they felt required to cover big stories in depth, obligations that the million channels and billions of internet blogs don’t feel the responsibility to do. The result is that more and more we don’t even get the same essential facts or headlines, she stated.

Noonan’s home-hitting comments brings to mind a [recent editorial](#) published in the February 3 issue of the *Wisconsin State Journal* which contains partial and incomplete facts to conclude that since railroads don’t receive taxpayer assistance, barges should maintain their navigation corridors and trucks should pay their share of road damage. This, said the author, would reduce taxes, transportation costs and fuel consumption that, in turn, lead to a longer life for roads and bridges.

As that’s the sum and substance of the editorial, we thought we’d fill in some blanks.

Firstly, the author states Wisconsin’s Department of Transportation definition of ‘transportation’ means highway and bridge building to support car and truck traffic; and suggests the discussion should include barge, car, truck and rail. We are in complete agreement with that statement.

So is Wisconsin. According to its website WisDOT is already responsible for all of the above plus public transit and air transport as well.

Motor vehicle tax

With regards to the authors claim that “cars pay so heavy trucks can be profitable”, Wisconsin’s 2011 – 2013 highway budget \$6.5 billion, 50% of which is dedicated to rehabilitating existing highways and bridges. Another \$734 million is set aside for major highway projects. Revenue comes from a 32.9 cent per gallon state tax on gasoline along with a 57.3 cent per gallon state tax on diesel fuel as well as registration fees, motor carrier fees, aviation and aircraft fees and taxes and, get this, railroad taxes such as the tax on rail property. As an aside, if you’re a private pilot, you better make all your pit stops locally as Wisconsin’s tax on general aviation fuel is only 6 cents per gallon.

As to tax segregation, Wisconsin is unique in that it has a segregated, unified Transportation Fund that puts transportation revenues into a separate account apart from the General Fund.

Given the complexity and wide sweep of transportation tax, we don’t honestly know if cars pay so heavy trucks can be profitable. And, if pushed to prove his remarks, the author may not know either.

Railroad tax

The author also said that since railroads maintain their roadbeds largely without taxpayer assistance, barges should maintain their navigation corridor and trucks should pay their share of road damage. To focus on railroads for a minute, it must be remembered that in the 1800s railroads received large Federal land grants on which they could either build their railroad or sell to finance construction. It must also be remembered that in the 1970s the New York Central and Pennsylvania railroads filed bankruptcy merged to become Conrail, with federal assistance of upwards to \$6 billion.

And it must be remembered that railroads pay property taxes to states through which they operate.

However to state that railroads maintain roadbeds largely without federal taxpayer assistance might be a bit of a stretch.

Waterways

With particular reference to water transport, Lakes Superior and Michigan are gateways for the state’s water commerce, while

transport on the Mississippi River is a mere afterthought. Even so, Wisconsin has a ports and harbors program which directs state funds to worthy and necessary waterway projects on the Great Lakes as well as the Mississippi River.

The author stated that barges get the farmers' crops to market, that barges are owned by ConAgra and Cargill, while the Army Corps of Engineers maintains their navigation corridors. First of all, shippers such as ConAgra and Cargill normally do not own barges. Secondly, the operative word here is "their" to suggest the author implied that navigation corridors belong to farmers, ConAgra, Cargill and the Corps of Engi-

neers. They don't. Waterways belong to the nation and its citizen-taxpayers. This came about because rivers, like mountains and oceans, are natural elements used by humans for transport and drinking water since we learned to walk.

Locks and dams which form today's commercial navigation channels were authorized by Congress in the early 20th century as a means of breaking the strangle-hold railroads held on the nation's economy.

Unlike private railroad property, waterways are available to anyone using anything that floats – whether a string of 15 barges or a raft made of plastic milk cartons. That goes for the lock and dam

system as well. Are you a lone occupant in a canoe that wants to and get through a lock? Simply pull the chain to open the lock. No charge.

Already paying

Finally, we'll address the issue of whether or not barges should maintain their navigation corridors. They already do.

The barge industry pays a 20 cent per gallon tax on all fuel consumed in waterway operations. This tax is paid into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund and used to finance 50% of major construction projects. The remaining 50% as well as operation and maintenance expenses is paid out of the federal treasury on

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"...Locks and dams... were authorized by Congress in the early 20th century as a means of breaking the strangle-hold railroads held on the nation's economy..."

Other river related items:

- The [St. Paul District of the Corps of Engineers web site](#) has a new look. The web pages were moved to a new hosting platform earlier this month, but the web address stays the same. However, the Corps says some of the web addresses or bookmarks you may have stored will no longer work because of the move to the new system hosted by the Department of Defense.
- The Corps will begin its [annual ice thickness measurements on Lake Pepin](#) Wednesday, Feb. 13, and results will be available online. The Corps says they use GPS technology and an airboat to give precise measurement locations. Lake Pepin is usually the last part of the navigation channel where ice breakup occurs in the spring, so it's an indicator of when the first tow of the season may break through. Last year the first tow to make it through the lake was the Mv. Deana Ann .
- Former [Congressman James Oberstar](#) is said to be a strong candidate to replace U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood when he retires. No date has been given for the retirement, but LaHood has indicated he's ready to leave the job. During his many years in Congress, Oberstar was known for his grasp of transportation issues

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The article also highlighted other points that UMWA and other organizations have long been making.

"We are blessed to have our great breadbasket and river system line up," says Dave Busse, the chief of engineering and construction for the corps' St. Louis District. "In Brazil, they grow soybeans but spend a lot to get it to the water. The Nile [and] Congo don't have much grain around them."

New Caucus formed

The U.S. Senate has a [new caucus](#) that will focus on Mississippi River issues. Senators Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Roy Blunt (R-MO) say they are now talking with other senators about joining the group to work for more money for locks and dams.

Harkin says, "We learned a vital lesson this past fall when a potential disruption in navigation along the Mississippi threatened everything from increasing the cost to move goods to potential job losses. The river and its communities play an important role in commerce and the local economy.

Iowa meeting

Also this month a group convened by [Iowa Governor Terry Branstad](#) got together at the Blackhawk Hotel in Davenport to talk about how to secure funding for maintenance and construction of river infrastructure.

The group included government and industry people, but discussion was focused on how to get Congress to appropriate the dollars needed.

Gary Meden, who is deputy commander for programs

and project management in the COE's Rock Island district, told the group that current appropriations are like spending \$50 a year to keep an old car running.

After the meeting, Branstad talked with reporters about a possible state compact of some sort to raise money.

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the premise that the benefits of low water transportation rates flow to the entire nation and its taxpayers.

For a copy of a March 17, 1932 radio address describing the national crisis caused by transportation costs crushing agriculture email us at umwa@umwa.net subject line: CCWebber.

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