

InfrastructureUSA

Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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Conversation with Steve Anderson, Managing Director, InfrastructureUSA

Waterways Council: Advocating for the Fourth “R”

We look at the transportation system as encumbering four R's: roads, runways, rails, and rivers. And because of the jurisdiction of the Department of Transportation, which focuses on roads, runway and rail, our program is under the jurisdiction of the United States Army Corps of Engineers. We are a coalition of carriers, shippers who use the waterways, ports, organized labor who build the projects, conservationists who partner with us and some of the Corps of Engineer programs. We're about 175 members strong and they range from large corporations, such as Cargill or Bunge, down to a small port or a small family-owned carrier. There are about 300 inland waterway carriers. Most of them are third or fourth generation small business operators, but there're also some large players in the space, like American Electric Power. We're an advocate for a modern, efficient, reliable inland waterway transportation system. It's a 12,000-mile system of both open-water and lock-and-dam-controlled waterways, moving about 600 million tons a year at a value of \$232 billion dollars. We move 60% of the nation's grain for example. So it's a very important part of the supply chain, and we're the advocate for keeping it open and reliable.

We Need Leadership to Push for Infrastructure

We need leadership from elected officials to articulate those messages so that people hear them, because an individual sitting at home primarily gets his information from the media and the media tends to focus only on crisis. When things are working well, like our waterways, there's no focus on them. And so people don't understand how important they are to deliver the inputs that are needed for manufacturing, for electricity, for gasoline delivery. This is the safest mode and the most efficient mode for moving traffic. But because it functions so well, nobody pays attention to it unless elected officials bring focus and say, "We need more investment in infrastructure," like the President has, and then motivates Congress to respond to this. We need champions for this vision of investing in infrastructure. We had great vision under President Eisenhower, when we created the Interstate System, because he understood how important it was to the national defense, and look what it's done for the national economy. We had, similarly, visions in the 1800s about the importance of the waterways. In fact, our first President commented on how blessed we were and he prayed to God that we had the wisdom to invest in our waterways. And that's the kind of need we have: it's our elected officials calling focus on these issues and saying "This is what our lifestyle depends upon; this is how we afford the benefits of our society; this is how we grow our economy, by investing in all modes of transportation," and including things like safe drinking water and wastewater treatment. Those are important infrastructure investments in the nation.

Bringing the Right Kind of Attention to Inland Waterways

It's all about education. You see the railroads, for example, spending \$8 million a year on advertising about their system and the efficiency of their system. 300 small businesses can't compete with the Class 1 Railroads in advertising, but what we do do is try to use social media and targeted advertising where decision makers live to try to get that message out. We had over

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a million hits last year when we did a Google program where we placed an ad and asked people if they wanted to learn more about the Upper Mississippi navigation system, and we had over a million hits on that. So we're trying to use alternatives to buying expensive television time to get our message out. And then the other is we conduct editorial board visits to try to educate the media, the print media, about the importance of the waterways. And we go to those locations that have waterways, and bring in people from the local area to talk about the importance of the waterways to the local economy. Then some of our stakeholders like the Ag industry which is trying to grow the family farm economy through exports—and that is primarily through exports delivered by waterway because of the cost savings—they are our best advocates in trying to educate people. Now we did have one event in the Winter of 2011/2012, where we almost lost the navigation system from St. Louis to Cairo, Illinois because of low water on the Upper Mississippi and the shut off of Missouri River water by the Corps for winter storage and we had every major news outlet out in St. Louis covering the potential catastrophe from not being able to deliver gasoline or home heating oil or electricity—let alone the inputs for manufacturing, which would have to be shut down because the river was not able to sustain the navigation channels. So we got tremendous coverage for a negative event. But the Corps, which is underfunded, has adopted a program of fixes/fails, so they wait for something to fail at a lock, like a cable, before they perform any kind of remedial initiatives.

Our Waterways Work, but Updates Are Needed

Our forefathers invested in the inland waterways system. They had a great vision, and while the projects had a 50-year design life, we're still operating many of the original projects. And as a result, we're keeping them going but they're not as efficient as we could be. Today, a modern tow is 1200 feet long with 15 barges. The locks on many of our waterways have no redundancy, that is only one lock and if that lock were to fail, we'd stop commerce. But the other is, they're only 600 feet long and so the tows have to break apart. It takes a long three to four hours to do that, and so it adds cost to the transportation system and so we have been over the last two decades investing in building 1200 foot locks but we still have another 25 years to go to get there. But the system is in relatively good shape from a maintenance point of view, although there are individual examples where the structure is failing, but so far has not failed. The system is dependable, but if we continue to not invest in the system, it will at some point reach a state of unreliability. We are not there, therefore we are not in a crisis, and we now have a program underway to modernize the system over the next 20 to 25 years. But the President's initiative of modernizing infrastructure over the next ten years would allow us to deliver these projects faster, at lower cost than the current program has underway.

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