



## **Water Resources and Transportation: The Need for Integrated Systems**

***An integrated, comprehensive and collaborative approach to water resources management, development and protection is critical to the environmentally sound and efficient use of our nation's water resources. A balanced approach, recognizing the importance of sustainable economic development and the protection and restoration of significant aquatic ecosystems, will promote both economic security and the quality of life for all Americans.***

There is much discussion of late about the need for a better integrated freight transportation system. The benefits that would accrue to the nation from better transportation integration are obvious. From origin to destination, freight typically moves over multiple modes: from U.S. ports to rail to highways, or from trucks to barges to ships. So, having these modes coordinated as part of a system would seem to logically reduce the time and cost of goods movement, with associated benefits to the nation's economy.

However, there is another important variable in this formulation – one clearly understood by those involved in this issue in the past but often overlooked today. And that is water. It not only plays an important role in transportation systems, it also is the key resource to many, often competing, beneficiaries in addition to supporting transportation. Flood control, ecological health, hydropower, recreation, and municipal/industrial water supplies – indeed life itself – are all dependent on water. These issues are typically in conflict and usually contentious. Balancing among them is a delicate act. As a result, the traditional approach in the U.S. has been to aggregate federal-level responsibilities for water resources, most notably within the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and to ask that they coordinate the transportation aspects of water resources with other agencies, typically the Department of Transportation.

After carefully considering the pros and cons of suggestions that this traditional approach be changed to one where federal transportation issues and programs are consolidated and coordination related to water resources issues extended to water agencies (essentially a reversal of the traditional process), the National Waterways Conference strongly recommends that the status quo be retained – leaving water resources issues consolidated at the federal agency level. The NWC believes this approach better serves both water resources interests and, in the long run, transportation programs and projects.

Water resources issues are among the most contentious faced by our society. They impact essential rights of individuals, communities and states, and often require the highest levels of dispute resolution. By contrast, resolving issues among different transportation modes is usually more a planning exercise – or a straight-forward business decision - than one involving life-or-death disputes, as water resources issues are often thought to be. And the federal role in waterborne transportation decisions readily lends itself to proven analytical methods, such as benefit-cost analysis, providing a sound basis for shippers, carriers and ports to make decisions, acting through transportation services markets.

Keeping appropriate federal activities in water resources issues consolidated offers an opportunity to negotiate “give-and-take” among interests resulting in brokered compromises among competing interests, and allows federal responsibilities for water to be properly coordinated with those at state and local levels. Such compromises often allow projects to go forward without expensive and time-consuming litigation. These agreements garner far less attention than the more newsworthy conflicts but they are far more productive and beneficial to the nation.

No doubt, better communication among the different modes of transportation may lead to some enhanced cooperation. However, establishing an office of national freight policy will not create jobs; it will not lead to smaller government; and it will not lead to a decrease in Federal spending. In fact, quite the opposite will likely happen.

Even more concerning, a consolidated approach to transportation systems without consideration of the other uses of water is sure to lead to increased costs and project times for both transportation and water improvement projects. An approach to use of water as a first priority for our transportation system would certainly not guarantee that the rights and interests of other water users would be met. Those users would surely continue to demand that their interests be respected – and would leave the federal transportation agencies without the means to address those multiple uses of water and effect compromises among users.

Factors such as the integral relationship between the Clean Water Act and “navigable” waterways, the never-ceasing upstream vs. downstream conflicts, the shared federal-state-local oversight of water and water uses, and the mixed priorities related to water held by most Americans all argue for the federal role in waterborne transportation – founded in the Commerce Clause of the Constitution - to remain consolidated with other water resources oversight responsibilities in one agency, such has been traditionally maintained by the Corps of Engineers.

***To ensure the long-term efficient and environmentally sound use of our nation’s water resources, the National Waterways Conference supports an integrated, comprehensive and collaborative approach to water resources management, development and protection.***



*The National Waterways Conference, established in 1960, is dedicated to a greater understanding of the widespread public benefits of our nation’s water resources infrastructure. Our mission is to effect common sense policies and programs, recognizing the public value of our nation's water resources and their contribution to public safety, a competitive economy, national security, environmental quality and energy conservation. Conference membership is comprised of the full spectrum of water resources stakeholders, including flood control associations, levee boards, waterways shippers and carriers, industry and regional associations, port authorities, shipyards, dredging contractors, regional water districts, engineering consultants, and state and local governments.*

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