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Rivers of green: The new administration must fix locks and dams

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Pittsburgh owes its existence to its rivers, which first served as roads through the wilderness. To this day, the city's economic fortunes are still linked to river traffic -- this is the second-largest inland port in the United States.

Those barges plying our three rivers require an efficient, reliable system of locks and dams, which, in the region's best interest, should be kept in good repair. As it happens, this is also in the nation's interest. As he sets his national agenda, it is vital that President-elect Barack Obama keep this in mind because the system is under severe strain.

The value of a good waterborne transportation system should be obvious, but [a study](#), funded by the National Waterways Foundation and the U.S. Maritime Administration and released earlier this year, underscored the point. The Texas Transportation Institute's Center for Port and Waterways at Texas A&M University drew telling comparisons with alternatives, namely trucks and trains.

Worried about truck-clogged roads? The study found that one common 15-barge river tow has the same capacity as 1,050 trucks (as well as 216 rail cars pulled by six locomotives).

How about pollution and the environment? The study found that barges generate fewer emissions of particulate matter, hydrocarbons, carbon monoxide and nitrous oxide than trains or trucks on a per-ton-mile-moved basis.

Concerned about fuel consumption? The study determined that barges can move a ton of cargo 576 miles with a single gallon of fuel compared to 413 ton miles per gallon for trains and 155 ton miles per gallon for trucks.

The study underscores the importance of keeping inland barge traffic moving to the greater benefit of the nation. Unfortunately, that is not assured and Pittsburgh is a symbol of the problem. The Army Corps of Engineers, Pittsburgh, which operates 23 locks and dams for navigation in its five-state district, describes this as the nation's oldest, largest and most fatigued navigation system in the corps' inland inventory.

Nationwide, the system is struggling for funding for repairs and construction. The Inland Waterways Trust Fund, the funding mechanism jointly supported by the federal government and barge operators (who pay a 20 cent a gallon tax on fuel) is seriously depleted, and projects vital to the system's efficiency are suffering. If the infrastructure goes on being underfunded, the system itself may crack at great cost to the nation's commerce.

During the presidential campaign, Mr. Obama proposed creating a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that would have \$60 billion over 10 years to spend on a wide range of infrastructure projects in general. Inland barge transportation and its needs must be part of any future discussion.

Infrastructure isn't sexy, it's just vital. And in Pittsburgh we know that better than anybody.

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