



News from the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Rep. Nick J. Rahall, II — Ranking Member

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STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE TIMOTHY H. BISHOP, RANKING MEMBER SUBCOMMITTEE ON WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT HEARING ON “THE ECONOMIC IMPORTANCE AND FINANCIAL CHALLENGE OF RECAPITALIZING THE NATION’S INLAND WATERS AND TRANSPORT SYSTEM” SEPTEMBER 21, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding another hearing to highlight the growing water infrastructure needs and challenges facing this nation.

Earlier this summer, this Subcommittee held a hearing on the adverse impacts that reduced Federal expenditures for maintenance dredging can have on our national and local economies, on the businesses and industries that depend on the efficient movement of goods and services, and on the jobs that are integrally linked to our ports and small boat harbors.

I recall how, in hearing after hearing, this Subcommittee has reviewed the declining condition of our water transportation corridors, our nation’s network of levees and other flood damage reduction projects, and our nation’s wastewater infrastructure. Countless witnesses have come before this Subcommittee to tell us what we should already realize – that our water related infrastructure is on the brink of failure – an event which can only result in adverse impacts to health, safety, prosperity, and quality of life should one of these systems fail.

Today, we will focus on another mode of our water-related infrastructure that is in serious need of repair – our nation’s inland waterway system.

As noted by the Inland Waterways Users Board, the estimated cost of repairing and modernizing the assets of the inland system is approximately \$8 billion. Yet, expenditures from the Inland Waterways Trust Fund – which was specifically established to pay half the cost of construction and most rehabilitation projects on the inland system – have been declining over the past few years, to a point where there are insufficient revenues in the Fund to cover the costs of ongoing projects.

Mr. Chairman, the evidence is clear that our nation is facing an infrastructure crisis. However, rather than take this challenge head-on, as we have traditionally done in a bipartisan manner, the running theme of the current majority is that Federal agencies and the American people should simply do “more with less.”

When it comes to constructing, operating, and maintaining the critical navigation, flood damage reduction, power supply, and water supply programs that our nation relies upon, the bottom line is that, with reduced funding, Federal agencies will be forced to do less with less.

At a time when this nation is facing critical issues, including historic flooding in almost every region of the country, as well as trying to kick-start our sluggish economy, now is exactly the wrong time to withhold vital funding for the nation’s systems of water infrastructure projects. Yet, that is exactly the path being pursued by the Republican majority in the House.

For example, in the first months of the 112th Congress, the Republican majority pushed to cut over \$500 million (or 10 percent) in the current fiscal year from an already strained Corps budget. Included with this overall cut, H.R. 1 proposed to reduce the Corps’ construction account by over 16.8 percent over the previous fiscal year’s level, and to reduce funding for the Corps’ work on the Mississippi River system by an unbelievable 30 percent.

Unfortunately, the new majority is not yet done with the Corps. The House-passed FY 2012 funding bill for the Corps further reduces the level of funding for the Corps by 11.5 percent (when compared to FY 2010 levels), including a remarkable cut of 20.5 percent to the Corps’s construction account, and an additional 38.2 percent reduction for the Corps’ work along the Mississippi River.

Contrast this with the recent jobs proposal of President Obama, which calls for an increase in investment for our nation’s infrastructure, including its wastewater and drinking water infrastructure, as well as commercial ports, levees, and projects on the inland waterways system.

So, as we listen to the testimony of industries that rely on the efficient movement of goods and services on our nation’s infrastructure networks, we must be mindful that these efficiencies can only come from a well-funded, and adequately maintained infrastructure system. In other words, “You get what you pay for.”

We must also be mindful of the concerns identified by many regarding the financing, prioritization, and sustainability of projects along the inland system. It seems to me that the current mechanisms are not working, as is evidenced by the fact that there are insufficient funds in the Inland Waterways Trust Fund to move projects along in a cost-effective manner. As a result, these projects take longer to construct, which often increases the total cost of the project.

However, I remain skeptical to the logic of shifting even greater portions of these costs onto the American taxpayer. To me, when paired with the Republican majority’s push to further reduce the Corps’ budget, adding additional responsibilities to the General Fund can only further strain our ability to meet the growing water-related infrastructure needs of our communities.

For example, if the Corps' already-constrained Construction account had to take on several hundred million dollars in costs currently covered by the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which communities will be told that funds are now no longer available to meet their needs, whether it be navigation, flood damage reduction, or environmental restoration?

Mr. Chairman, again, thank you, and I welcome the testimony of today's witnesses.

I yield back the balance of my time.