

Interactions Between Recreational and River Commerce Users on Navigable Rivers

Bill Barr

Vice President of Safety and Regulatory Compliance, Amherst Coal

“The relationship between commercial and recreational river users is basically very simple,” said Bill Barr, Vice President of Safety and Regulatory Compliance for Amherst Coal.

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Recalling his first tow boat cruise on the Ohio River about 30 years ago, Barr described a common attitude of the time held by some commercial waterway users toward recreational boaters.

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“We were cruising on a summer Saturday morning. One of the crew working nearby looked out at all the small pleasure craft on the river and said, “Well, the ‘idiot fleet’ is out in full force.”

Barr is a strong advocate of safe boating classes for recreational boaters and briefly discussed classes conducted on Amherst barges, which periodically are transformed into “floating classrooms” for that use.

“The classes are an excellent liaison builder between commercial and recreational boaters and an unbeatable educational experience for both groups,” he noted. “We usually have about 14 or 15 recreational boaters in each class. The experience helps them gain a new respect for tow boats.”

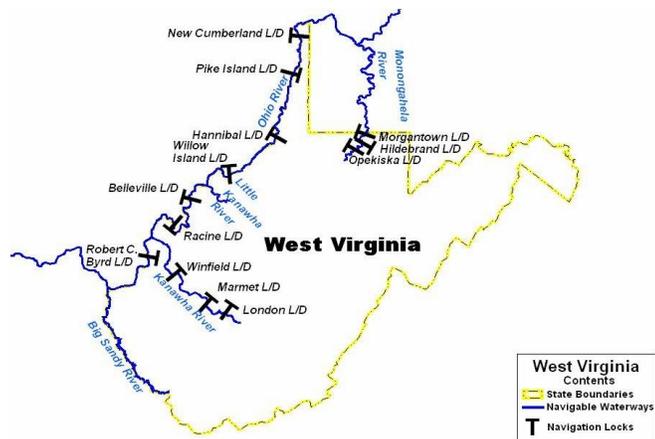
Turning his remarks to the widespread benefits of the nation’s extensive lock-and-dam system, Barr presented a broader perspective of the pools formed between those structures.

“Without pools, we wouldn’t have commercial boating,” he said. “Towns and cities wouldn’t be able to draw water for commercial and residential use. We wouldn’t have recreational boaters. In the end, we’re *all* river users.”

He also made a strong case for the direct, local economic benefits realized by a municipality’s proximity to a navigable waterway.

“Maybe 5,000 jobs exist in the Kanawha Valley because ‘a river runs through it,’” he said, referencing the popular book and movie. “How many jobs in Monongalia County depend on the Monongahela running through it?”

In the bigger picture, an efficient inland waterway system benefits the entire nation both economically and ecologically, according to Barr.



“A single gallon of fuel can move one ton of goods 514 miles by barge,” he said. “That same gallon can transport a ton 202 miles by train. By truck, one gallon can move a ton just 59 miles.

Obviously, river transportation is not just more economical, but also less polluting.”

Barr briefly outlined an immediate and pressing challenge faced by all river users: insuring sufficient, on-going funding for the operation and maintenance (O&M) of the locks and dams on the nation’s waterways.

Currently, Inland Waterway Trust Fund monies are derived from a 20-cent per gallon fuel tax paid by commercial waterway users and administered by the Army Corps of Engineers: these monies are applied to the operational and maintenance expenses of the nation’s lock and dam system. This tax currently generates approximately \$100 million annually and is supplemented by additional annual federal appropriations – appropriations that have dwindled in recent years due to the general federal budget deficit.

Given that shrinking federal appropriation and ever-increasing O&M costs, the Corps is contemplating doubling its annual budgetary goal to \$200 million. Two strategies have been under consideration for reaching that goal, and both are controversial. The first increases the fuel tax paid by commercial users from 20-cents to 45-cents per gallon. The second levies a \$70 per-barge lockage fee, which also would be shouldered only by commercial waterway users.

Barr contends that this financial burden should be shared by *all* constituencies who benefit from the operation and maintenance of a safe and efficient national waterway system.

“We’re all part of this together,” he said. “Commercial towing, municipalities, industry and recreational users should share the costs of projects that improve the navigability of our waterways.”

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