
PITTSBURGH REGION

Stockman endangers strategic waterways

by Glenn Mesaros

Twenty-five thousand miles of navigable inland waterways are currently the target of an alliance of Stockmanite budget cutters and radical environmentalists in Washington. Both these zero-growth forces have joined to propose that the Federal budget which takes effect Oct. 1, 1982 end the historic commitment of the U.S. government to maintain this lifeblood of American industry; the government spends \$150 million annually in subsidies to the waterways.

If these cuts go through, say Pittsburgh-area industrialists who are fighting in Washington to restore them, it means the end of their steel-based economy—already decimated by high interest rates. Pittsburgh is the premier inland waterway port in America, handling over 72 million tons of commodities in 1978. By comparison, the seaport of Baltimore handled 46.8 million tons of cargo in 1978.

Ton for ton, waterway transport is the cheapest mode of shipping cargo. While the average truck can carry 13.7 tons, and a railcar carries about 61.8 tons, the average tow barge transports over 1,200 tons of material. Thus while it costs 2.4 cents to transport one ton of material one mile on the railroads, barges can move one ton one mile for 0.6 cents, about one-fourth the rail cost.

The annual subsidies in the federal budget maintain the intricate system of locks and dams, particularly in the eastern United States. The heaviest concentration of these locks lie within the 570 miles of the Upper Ohio River basin, around Pittsburgh, through which flow 60 tons of produce for every non-agricultural job in this area of 8 to 10 million people, including chemicals, coal, and steel products.

The Stockmanite budget cutters propose that only the actual users of the waterways should pay for them with "user fees"—a tax on each ton of cargo moved per mile. They are telling the waterway users: either come up with the money to run that system, or we will shut it down. This proposal represents the current craze of zero-based budgeters in Washington who want to deregulate everything under the guise of "free enterprise," and then tax it to death under the rubric of "developing new sources of revenue."

These self-styled conservatives have found vocal allies in the environmentalist camp, namely, the National Audubon Society. Its president, Russell Peterson, who heads the Global Tomorrow Coalition, addressed the January water conference of the Northeast/Midwest Congressional Coalition on the subject of "financing reform. . . . We need to establish user fees that reflect the actual cost of a waterway. . . ."

In response to this alliance against industrial growth, Pittsburgh-area river users have formed a lobbying group called Dinamo (Developing Interstate Navigability on the Monongahela, Allegheny, and Ohio Rivers). "I believe Pittsburgh is being held hostage" said one river user. And well he might. If denied water transport, Pittsburgh utilities alone would have to use 1,500 trucks daily for coal transport.

Most of the locks in the river system are 50 years old and collapsing. One crucial lock at Gallipolis, Ohio handles 41 million tons annually, but each check into the lock now averages an 8 hour delay—which costs \$3,400—due to its poor condition. Projected delays for each use of the lock by 1990 are 32 hours. Replacement of the lock has not yet been authorized.

The river users point out that since the entire economy benefits from the system, the entire tax base should maintain it. This argument has prevailed since the administration of George Washington, who started 200 years of such internal improvements.

However, the Dinamo group is resigned to striking some kind of deal with the administration for "a fairer system of user fees." Their Senator from Pennsylvania, Republican Henry Heinz has lobbied for his waterways at the expense of the Tennessee-Tombigbee River project.

Steven Douglas, a candidate for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in Pennsylvania, not only opposes any kind of user fees, but wants the federal government to help build a long-sought-after Pittsburgh project for a canal linking that city with Lake Erie. This, he says, would greatly reduce the overland transportation of iron ore to Pittsburgh from Minnesota ore fields, and thus revitalize the American steel industry.

Meanwhile, anti-"pork barrelers" might reflect on the following testimony of former U.S. Corps of Engineer director Lt. Gen. Emerson Itschner in front of a congressional Committee in 1958: "While the [Soviet] Communists no doubt cheer the Americans who apply the porkbarrel epithet to U.S. water development, I am sure that no Russian would ever apply the term to any part of the huge Soviet river basin construction program." Since 1958, the Soviets have developed a superb inland waterway system of 79,000 miles, where a 1,500-ton barge can travel from the Arctic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea, while the United States threatens to close its 25,000 miles.