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Let's Get Going on Infrastructure

A new year brings fresh opportunity to address much-needed improvement projects. While the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) reauthorized more than a year ago includes upgrades for locks and dams on the Illinois and Upper Mississippi Rivers, the project has not yet been funded. It's time to get going on our infrastructure.

If the river system were to fail anytime soon, Illinois agricultural export capabilities and grower profitability would be severely compromised. If failure at Lock 25 on the Mississippi River near Winfield, Mo., or La Grange Lock on the Illinois River were to occur, the impact could be dramatic. Corn and soybean movement on the Upper Mississippi and Illinois Rivers accounts for nearly 44 percent of total volume and 17 percent of value of goods transported yearly through the two locks.

A study funded by the Illinois Chamber of Commerce Foundation in late 2007 confirms the value. Study researchers found that more than 60 million tons of goods, valuing more than \$29 billion, crossed the La Grange Lock and Lock 25 in 2005, the most recent figures available. To ship that value by other means during just the fourth quarter in 2005, an additional \$580 million by rail and \$1.6 billion more by truck would have been required. That would have cut corn and soybean grower revenue by about \$219 million.

The study concluded that in the event of a lock failure, the increase in transportation costs would push down commodity prices at the origin and push up commodity prices at the destination. Such a situation would dramatically and negatively affect the commodity being shipped and all commodity producers and consumers linked by transportation.

When President-Elect Barack Obama releases details about his economic stimulus package in the new year, let's hope lock and dam upgrade funding can be included. The plan is expected to focus on infrastructure and create or save millions of jobs over the next couple of years. Including improvements to our river lifeline would employ workers and help keep our soybean exports flowing into other ports for many years to come.

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