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DROUGHT AND FLOOD RESILIENCY PLANNING ENHANCED BY NEW COLLABORATIONS AIMED AT KEEPING RIVER TRAFFIC FLOWING

[ST. LOUIS, MO/May 25, 2023] With low water levels alternating with flood conditions to disrupt operations on the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers in recent years, those involved in creating the plans and policies to keep river traffic moving have found new ways to partner to strengthen the resiliency of the rivers for navigation. Their collaboration was the focus of a FreightWeekSTL 2023 virtual panel discussion on May 25, which featured panelists from the Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT), Missouri Department of Agriculture, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Coalition to Protect the Missouri River.

Cheryl Ball, Waterways and Freight Administrator for the Missouri Department of Transportation highlighted the role MoDOT is playing to address drought and resiliency issues on the inland waterways, and how partnerships, collaboration and communication are central to their success. Among MoDOT's key initiatives is the creation of a drought action Commercial Navigation Impact Team to support freight movement. Comprised of multiple stakeholders ranging from state agencies, navigators, ports and other departments of transportation to the Coast Guard, Corps of Engineers, National Weather Service and the St. Louis Regional Freightway, the committee looks at how drought or flooding may be impacting Missourians, and considers what they can do either as a group or as state to help minimize those impacts and keep freight flowing on the rivers.

"We want to make sure that navigators and the ports have all the information because if you can plan ahead, you can look at how things are happening and maybe make alternative plans," said Ball. "That's one of the reasons MoDOT was most interested in freight, because if it can't move on the river, then it has to move in another place. So, it's either going to go to rail or trucking, and both of those modes have quite a bit of congestion going on right now. We want to keep traffic flowing on the river to the best of our abilities. So, when we pulled this group together and discussed those items, what we found was a couple of root cause issues, and we're now working toward remedying those."

Lou Dell'Orco, Chief of Operations for the St. Louis Division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, provided an update on the Corps proactive approach to help keep river traffic moving. The Corps of Engineers is responsible for maintaining the congressionally authorized channel dimensions of nine feet of depth and 300 feet of width on 300 miles of the middle Mississippi River from Saverton, Missouri to Cairo, Illinois. The channel in this area is primarily maintained by dredging.

"We utilize dredging to provide safe, efficient, and reliable movement to keep commerce flowing on the Mississippi River in support of the nation's economy. Over 500 million tons – half of all U.S. grain exports – transit the Mississippi River at some point annually," said Dell'Orco.

Dell'Orco said early on in the 2022 dredging season, the Corps noticed that the hydrograph for St. Louis was closely mirroring that of 2012, which was the last time the area experienced a significant drought.

"In September, we began to implement lessons learned from that previous timeline which would enable efficient dredging and keep the channel open and at authorized dimensions with the forecast we were facing," Dell'Orco said.

He explained the actions taken consisted of managing releases from their reservoirs when they did have precipitation or when they could take it down a little, and then strategically bringing in more Corps of Engineers and contract dredges ahead of critical times throughout the season when low water was persistent. In all, five dredges were utilized at various timeframes.

“Our dustpan dredges are able to fill up an Olympic size swimming pool every hour when they're in full production. So, the Mississippi River water levels finally started to rise, and the mission was complete in February 2023,” said Dell’Orco.

Shane Kinne, Executive Director of the Coalition to Protect the Missouri River, which represents a broad cross section of industry that live and work on the Missouri River, provided insight on the current state of river navigation and what has happened recently to improve movement on the waterways.

“Despite some recent low runoff years, I think it’s important to note that these are really exciting times for navigation on the Missouri River,” he said. “The most recent numbers from 2020 show that over 5.4 million tons were moving on the Missouri River, which is a significant increase over the 2019 number of 3.9 million tons. And that's a mix of sand and gravel being the largest piece, in addition to fertilizer, petroleum products, grain and a lot of other things as well.”

Kinne also mentioned in late 2021, the bipartisan infrastructure law that was passed allocated nearly $249 million specifically to the Missouri River Bank Stabilization and Navigation Project to repair and make improvements to the Missouri River Navigation Channel. He added that the investment, along with some previous repairs, is having a sizable impact on the reliability of the channel.

“Reliability and resiliency for our transportation network is key, because being able to depend on it and have options to move products and freight is really important,” said Kinne. “We've seen a significant impact on that reliability because of that investment. Last year, several ports and pilots on the river who work on it every day indicated that, thanks to this work and the continued work that's happening, they were able to continue to move freight products last summer when in previous dry years of this nature they probably wouldn't have.”

Chris Klenklen, a 30-year veteran with the Missouri Department of Agriculture, currently serves as Deputy Director, a role in which he collaborates with other state agencies on how to help farmers and agribusinesses get their grain and fertilizer moved upriver. Another important role the agency plays as part of the drought task force is communicating with farmers to verify they are filing reports with the Drought Assessment Center to make sure that the drought maps – which drive a lot of federal assistance to the farmers – are indeed accurate.

“In the middle of a drought, we're also worried about just taking care of basic needs like livestock water,” said Klenklen. “We may be working with other cabinet agencies to determine if there's lakes that we can access to help provide water to our livestock industry in the state. The key is getting all the partners together to determine what the best reaction is and work with the Governor's office and all the cabinet agencies to get a response that farmers can use.”

Dell’Orco and the Corps of Engineers also played a key role in keeping communication flowing with its Weekly Navigation Channel Condition Status Report, which was critical to maintaining a common operating picture and mitigating the impacts to low water. In this report – which was created in the wake of the 2012 drought – the Corps published current and forecasted water levels, areas where dredges are working, special instructions for specific river reaches, implementation of the U.S. Coast Guard Waterways Action Plan and navigation instruction where buoys were missing. The input for this report included feedback from the team, whether it was the Corps, the Coast Guard River Industry Action Committee or state agencies. Dell’Orco said everyone consistently provided quality information that was available via GIS websites and centers, focusing on getting more real-time data to users faster.

“The information presented enabled users to make good business decisions and maximize what could be safely shipped given the current forecast and conditions,” said Dell’Orco. “This is critical as every one foot in a barge translates to 6,000 bushels of grain. The bottom line for this year was the team, through communication, collaboration and cooperation, was able to minimize the impacts to the economy during drought conditions on the middle Mississippi River.”

Looking forward to continuing to strengthen the resiliency of the river for navigation, Ball and the Commercial Navigation Impact Team, in addition to the Supply Chain Task Force formed by Missouri Governor Mike Parson, identified a need to make sure that locks and dams are working well, and that investments are being made appropriately so the channel is available to navigators when they need it. They are thinking ahead long-term, not just planning when the disaster hits, but assessing what can be done now.

Kinne highlighted the Lower Missouri River Study and how the partners involved are coming together to try to set the stage for proactive flood and drought resiliency. He said there are actually two ongoing, multi-state studies – a flood resiliency and navigation resiliency study – that will eventually tie together as they are interrelated on one river system.

"The studies are important because they give us an official process to examine the current state of the navigation on the river, as well as look at some of the original design assumptions and look at new ideas to increase the reliability and resiliency on the river," said Kinne. "Ultimately, at the end of it, we will have a Chief's report that we can take to Congress and actually get real authorizations of actual projects that are agreed upon that will improve the system. It's key to have this kind of more official process to address many of the challenges that we've been working on the Missouri River for decades. This is a really important moment in time partnered with the investment that we already have in the river with the infrastructure bill to make a huge impact. It's exciting what we might be able to accomplish to get more to that reliability and resiliency we're achieving."

Klenklen reinforced how critical having a reliable river system is for Missouri farmers who rely on the transportation system to move grain and fertilizer. When the river becomes less reliable and water isn't available for transport, that causes huge logistics issues, especially in a year marked by pending rail strikes and truck driver shortages.

"I think it's important to realize that our farmers are going to continue to adopt new technologies, which are going to continue to allow us to grow more and more volumes of grain, and exports are critical to the profitability of our farmers," he added. "We're going to be demanding and needing more transportation of all modes. When we look at what mode is somewhat underutilized, I'd say there's room for growth on the river, so we're excited about that. Our waterways give us a strategic advantage and we need to leverage that."

Panel moderator Mary Lamie said, "I think the biggest takeaway is that this initiative you all are working on is a true collaboration and partnership that will go a long way towards strengthening the resiliency of the rivers for navigation. We're pleased to be able to highlight your work and the benefits it will yield for the shipping industry." Lamie is the Executive Vice President of Multi Modal Enterprises for Bi-State Development, which operates the St. Louis Regional Freightway as one of its enterprises.

To view the panel session, visit www.freightweekstl.com. FreightWeekSTL 2023 continues through May 26 featuring virtual panel sessions with industry experts and leaders in freight, logistics and transportation. The week-long freight and logistics expo is presented by the St. Louis Regional Freightway and Bi-State Development. To learn more or to register for upcoming panel sessions or watch earlier sessions for FreightWeekSTL 2023, visit www.freightweekstl.com.

About St. Louis Regional Freightway

A Bi-State Development enterprise, the St. Louis Regional Freightway is a regional freight district and comprehensive authority for freight operations and opportunities within eight counties in southwestern Illinois and eastern Missouri, which comprise the St. Louis metropolitan area. Public sector and private industry businesses are partnering with the St. Louis Regional Freightway to establish the bi-state region as one of the premier multimodal freight hubs and distribution centers in the United States through marketing and advocacy for infrastructure development that supports the movement of freight. To learn more, visit www.thefreightway.com.