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Lawmakers Experience Firsthand View of Inland Waterways' Role in Regional and National Economy during FreightWeekSTL Tours

[ST. LOUIS, MO/June 16, 2026] – State legislators from across the bi-state St. Louis region and several of their staff members joined industry leaders June 9 for a series of tours and presentations highlighting the inland waterways' critical role in freight movement, economic competitiveness and global connectivity. Hosted by Ingram Infrastructure Group (part of Ingram Marine Group), Waterways Council, Inc., and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers as a featured event during FreightWeekSTL, the program provided firsthand exposure to barge terminal operations, lock and dam infrastructure, and the multimodal network connecting river, rail and truck transportation.

Morning Tour Showcases Scale, Speed and Global Reach

The day began with a tour of several of Ingram's terminal facilities along the Mississippi River in Madison County, Ill., where participants saw how commodities move rapidly between transportation modes. Frank Prentiss, Commercial Vice President of Ingram Infrastructure Group, highlighted how these terminals serve as a direct pipeline to global markets.

"Most of what we send through here is going to go directly from rail car onto the conveyor then onto a barge," Prentiss said. He noted that among the commodities moving through the terminals are grains and grain byproducts moving directly to international markets, and inbound steel products as well as fertilizer supporting Midwest agriculture.

The tour also illustrated the scale of Ingram's operations, with Prentiss noting their terminals in the area handle more than 25,000 rail cars annually. Participants learned how investments in efficiency gains have significantly improved reliability at the terminals, with equipment uptime increasing from approximately 65–70 percent to more than 95 percent in recent years. Operational efficiency was further demonstrated through rapid unloading capabilities, including the ability to process large unit trains — up to 120 cars — within a 24-hour period.

Prentiss also emphasized the time-sensitive nature of river logistics, noting barges must meet strict delivery windows to connect with oceangoing vessels in New Orleans or risk missing scheduled shipments. The discussion underscored how the system's speed, coordination and reliability are essential to keeping supply chains moving and maintaining U.S. competitiveness.

Locks and Dam Tour Underscores Importance of Reliability and Investment

Participants then toured the Melvin Price Locks and Dam in Alton, Ill., and learned about the history, construction and ongoing challenges facing the nation's lock and dam system, which has some locks that are more than 100 years old. At just 40-years old, the Melvin Price Locks and Dam is the newest lock and dam on the Mississippi. Andrew Schimpf, Chief of Operations and Readiness for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer's Navigation Business Line, explained that the Melvin Price Locks and Dam was built to improve reliability rather than expand capacity.

“It was not being replaced because of increased capacity ... it was a reliability issue,” Schimpf said, noting that structural failures in the previous lock required urgent replacement.

Schimpf discussed the operation of the locks and different types of gate mechanisms, highlighting that the upstream lift gate is a vertical lift gate. “It lowers down under the tows, and the purpose of that is 100% to pass ice,” Schimpf said. He painted a vivid picture of a 1,200-foot tow coming downstream in January, pushing another thousand feet of ice in front of it with some of the chunks of ice being the size of a house to help underscore the importance of the locks being able to have that ice pass through so the river can remain open for commerce.

Schimpf also discussed the broader system funding model, explaining that investments are supported through both federal appropriations and user-funded mechanisms such as the Inland Waterways Trust Fund, which is funded through a 29 cent per gallon fuel tax on commercial towing operators on the river.

Presentations Highlight Need for Modernization and Investment

During the luncheon program, participants learned that 65% of grain exports move on the inland waterways, and as many as 540,000 jobs depend on inland navigation. Nearly 500 million annual tons valued at over \$150 billion flow on the nation’s river system, which includes 12,000 miles of waterways in 28 states. Deb Calhoun, Senior Vice President of Waterways Council, Inc., shared those and other stats from the National Waterways Foundation’s most recent report, which she said is based on 2021 data, so the numbers are likely even greater today.

“This is a system that’s a jobs creator and jobs sustainer and an economic generator,” Calhoun said.

She reinforced that maintaining this level of performance requires continued infrastructure investment and emphasized the importance of modernizing aging lock infrastructure to support efficiency and safety. “In today’s economy we need to have more efficiency to continue to compete in the global marketplace,” Calhoun said.

She noted that modern 1,200-foot locks allow full barge tows to pass through more quickly, reducing delays and improving system performance. She also highlighted how modernization creates redundancy in the system, helping maintain operations even during maintenance or disruptions.

Angela Grett, Vice President – Corporate Affairs for Ingram Marine Group, described the inland waterways as “the silent giant kind of industry that nobody really knows about, but is a very integral part of the supply chain.” She provided an overview of the different careers available aboard the various types of vessels operating on the inland waterways, highlighting the large variation in size, power, construction and areas of operation for those vessels. She noted that tow sizes on the lower Mississippi River below St. Louis can top 1,500 feet in length and move more than 72,500 tons. For reference, she compared the tow length to 14 football fields.

Grett also emphasized that investments in the inland waterways are not just about infrastructure, they are about strengthening the nation’s supply chain and supporting economic activity that depends on efficient freight movement. She highlighted the impact of Lock & Dam 25 adding a 1,200-foot chamber so that large tows with multiple barges can pass through without having to be broken apart/uncoupled, indicating that traversing the lock takes just 45 minutes as opposed to more than two hours.

Together, the presentations reinforced that sustained federal investment in modern, reliable infrastructure is essential to maintaining the inland waterways system’s role as a cost-effective, high-capacity transportation option that connects the Midwest to national and global markets.

Afternoon Tour Provides On-the-Water Perspective

The day concluded with a boat tour aboard an Ingram vessel, offering participants a unique perspective of terminal operations and infrastructure along the Mississippi River, including a view of Lock and Dam 27. Seeing the system from the water reinforced how interconnected river operations are with rail and trucking networks—and how delays or inefficiencies at any point can ripple across the broader supply chain.

Following the vessel ride, legislators who participated in the full day of activities underscored the importance of the tours in building understanding of how the inland waterway system supports regional and global commerce.

Illinois State Sen. Erica Harriss said the experience highlighted the integration of transportation modes. “We got to see how rail and water all come together as part of our region and how important they are in bringing products in and out of the area,” Harriss said. “I think people who have lived in the area their entire lives probably have no idea the amount of activity that happens right here.”

Illinois State Rep. Amy Elik added that the tours illustrated the system’s global impact. “I was really fascinated to learn about the international import and export of goods right here through the St. Louis region and through our district,” said Elik. “It’s just so impactful, not just to our region but worldwide.”

Missouri State Rep. Del Taylor also participated in the days tours. “Inland waterways are the original highways,” Taylor said. “Trade along the waterways fueled Cahokia, Illinois' growth to be the largest pre-Columbian city in North America north of Mexico City. So much of St. Louis' history, story and greatness is tied to the rivers. In the legislature I advocate for infrastructure projects that fuel commerce and leverage our location at the confluence of two great rivers.”

The June 9 tours served as a key component of FreightWeekSTL, which was hosted by the St. Louis Regional Freightway. The week-long conference featured a variety of tours, expert panel discussions and one-on-one interviews exploring innovations, infrastructure investments and trends shaping global freight movement, while reinforcing the St. Louis region’s role as a leading multimodal logistics hub. To learn more or view any of the session recordings from FreightWeekSTL 2026, visit FreightWeekSTL.com.

About St. Louis Regional Freightway

Established as the St. Louis region’s authority for coordinating support for industrial businesses and the logistics infrastructure they depend on, the St. Louis Regional Freightway (the Freightway) provides site selection and business assistance to manufacturing, logistics and multimodal transportation companies and their service providers. As an enterprise of Bi-State Development, the Freightway partners with public sector and private industry businesses to advocate for infrastructure development that supports the movement of freight, leads initiatives to grow the region’s talent pool, and plays a critical role in marketing the region as a world-class manufacturing and distribution cluster within the City of St. Louis and seven adjacent counties in Missouri and Illinois. To learn more, visit TheFreightway.com.