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**Freight Summit Highlights Urgent Need for Inland Waterways  
Investment to Strengthen U.S. Supply Chains**

*Keynote emphasized multimodal connectivity and infrastructure priorities*

**[ST. LOUIS, MO/June 22, 2026]** The headline event of FreightWeekSTL 2026 brought industry leaders, freight stakeholders and transportation professionals together on a riverboat docked on the St. Louis riverfront to explore the vital role of inland waterways in the national freight network. Hosted by the St. Louis Regional Freightway, the June 10 Freight Summit featured a keynote conversation with Tracy Zea, President and CEO of Waterways Council, Inc., who works to advance public policy supporting the nation’s inland waterways transportation system. The theme of the keynote was *Investing in our Inland Waterways: Strengthening Freight Competitiveness*.

During the keynote, Zea described Waterway’s Council, Inc. as a “laser-focused” organization founded 23 years ago to advocate for the infrastructure of locks and dams on the inland waterways and to ensure that money designated for improvements is going in the right places.

He discussed how inland waterways support supply chain reliability, while emphasizing the need for sustained investment in infrastructure to maximize return and maintain system performance. He pointed to the St. Louis region’s strategic location as a hub where multiple freight modes intersect, making reliable waterways infrastructure essential to the efficiency of the broader national freight network.

Zea highlighted the interconnected nature of that network, noting that goods frequently move between truck, rail and barge as part of a seamless logistics system. Agricultural products, for example, often travel first by truck or rail before being transferred to barges for long-haul movement along the inland waterways system, highlighting how each mode depends on the others to function effectively. He emphasized that the strength of inland waterways directly impacts the efficiency of the broader supply chain and the competitiveness of industries that depend on it.

“It’s all connected, and every mode plays a role in keeping that system moving,” Zea said. “We believe a rising tide lifts all ships. We don’t think there’s one mode that’s better than the other — every mode should receive the funding it needs and be as efficient as possible.”

He also addressed current challenges within the inland waterways system, including capacity limitations and aging infrastructure, noting that reliability depends on continued investment in key assets such as locks and dams along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. Zea highlighted how navigation constraints, seasonal conditions and system inefficiencies can reduce throughput and create ripple effects across supply chains that extend far beyond the river system itself.

Lock and Dam 25 on the Mississippi River, just a little upriver from St. Louis in Winfield, Missouri, was highlighted by Zea as one infrastructure investment that would most improve reliability for shippers in the next few years. He noted the project has been authorized since 2007 and was funded to completion in the 2021 infrastructure package, receiving \$800 million. However, he said that about four months later, they got the word that it's going to need another \$1.5 billion to be completed. To address the significant cost overrun, several Missouri and Illinois legislators requested a \$250 million earmark in the appropriations bill this year to help chip away at that \$1.5 billion.

“So, we're going to need another three to four years of extremely large earmarks,” Zea said. “But getting that project done in an efficient manner will help our farmers, our aggregates, help with fertilizer. And here at WCI, we believe that's probably the most important project here for the next five years to get completed.” He added that it's imperative that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers completes the work efficiently, to illustrate that if provided large sums of funding, they can get the work done in a timely manner.

Zea said it's important for state and federal legislators to understand the return on investment for such improvements, pointing to examples such as Olmsted Lock and Dam that was recently completed and now contributes \$275 million annually the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and Lock and Dam 25 in the St. Louis region, which adds \$175 million to the GDP each year it's operational.

“If you're expanding the locks, you have to believe that more tonnage is going to come to the river, which would mean that it's more economically viable to actually increase and build these facilities,” Zea said. “New locks bring new investments, new terminals on the river, more commodities moving to the river and additional jobs.”

He discussed how the Corps of Engineers is starting to apply wholesale lessons across each region, building in more scheduled lock closures to address maintenance issues, which can reduce outages during busier times on the rivers. He also highlighted growing interest in innovations such as remote lock operations—allowing a single operator to manage multiple lock facilities—and early testing of remotely operated towboats. While these technologies could improve efficiency and address workforce challenges, he cautioned that they also introduce important safety and cybersecurity risks that must be carefully managed, particularly given the critical role human operators play in emergency response.

Zea emphasized that recent reforms within the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers signal a meaningful shift toward prioritizing the most viable infrastructure investments, pointing to an identified list of 20 priority construction projects—including four focused on inland waterways—as a step in the right direction. He noted that structural changes, such as separating personnel costs from project funding, will improve transparency and help address long-standing inefficiencies that have contributed to decades-long project timelines. At the same time, he underscored persistent funding challenges, highlighting that roughly 38% of infrastructure dollars are currently directed to salaries rather than physical improvements, limiting progress on backlog reduction and system modernization. Zea added that these reforms are intended to incentivize faster project delivery and greater accountability, while urging industry leaders to advocate for larger, transformative federal investments, stressing that meaningful infrastructure upgrades will require bold funding requests at scale.

“You can't nickel and dime with \$10, \$20, \$30 million,” he said. “You have to get people extremely comfortable with submitting requests for \$250, \$300, \$400, \$500 million. That is not pork barrel—that's going to real infrastructure.”

Mary Lamie, Executive Vice President of Multimodal Enterprises at Bi-State Development and head of the St. Louis Regional Freightway, moderated the keynote conversation. “We appreciate this deeper dive into the critical role of the inland waterways for supply chain reliability, economic competitiveness and long-term freight system resilience,” stated Lamie.

FreightWeekSTL 2026 was held June 8–12. To view the keynote or any other video sessions from the week, visit [FreightWeekSTL.com](https://www.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](https://www.TheFreightway.com).*