

Pick a little, talk a little

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Since the early '90's, a fierce debate has been raging over the Upper Mississippi River (UMR). The towing industry wants modernization of a lock-and-dam system built 70 years ago. On the other side, environmental interests demand that the federal government put money into restoration of river environment.

BOTH the industry and the environmentalists are right.

It is time for Congress to stop picking, squabbling, and bickering and make a deal.

Moreover, it is time for people in this beautiful valley who don't see themselves as either industry advocates or environmentalists to wake up to their own interests.

These interests can be summarized as tourism, recreation, and quality of life.

The tourist and recreational interest of the UMR add up to better than \$7 billion a year. Then there are the quality-of-life values of living in this valley with river pools, eagles, heron, egrets, and all the rest as our front yard.

Squabbling and inaction threaten the towing industry and also threaten environmental concerns as backwaters fill in and river habitat disappears. Squabbling threatens quality of life and a good deal of the economy of the Mississippi Valley.

Pick, pick, pick. Pick a little more, and don't notice what's being lost.

Since 1992, there has been plenty of time for environmentalists to highlight the towing industry's inability to prove for certain that lock improvements will pay off. They've become world-class economists in the process, arguing over an imaginary future 50 years down the pike.

To the extent that agricultural products don't continue to be shipped but are instead processed here in the Midwest, lock improvements might not be cost-effective. An ethanol plant is an example of this "on-site value-added" possibility, using a county's worth of corn. The ethanol product drives Midwestern cars, lessening our demand for foreign oil.

Congressman Gil Gutknecht has been a huge advocate of just such advances. It's hard to be against them.

But the fact is that American agriculture still supplies the needs of much of the world. And if grain is going to be shipped from the Midwest, it is an environmental horror to think how such volumes could be transported by rail or truck. Moreover, the industry has

paid special taxes for decades precisely for improvements to keep itself operating. And the industry is betting that lock improvement is what it needs to keep operating.

A dozen years of squabbling has convinced everyone in Congress that the legislative solution has to be a compromise, a combination of environmental and towing interests. Legislation currently proposed by Senator Kit Bond of Missouri authorizes equal dollars for environmental restoration and lock work.

The fly in the ointment is in the word "authorizes." Congress has authorized things before only to fail to come through on its promises.

For example, the special towing tax has been accruing in its trust account-but it isn't doing the industry any good on the Upper Miss. Understandably, the industry is exasperated that it can't get its own money spent on improvements.

On the environmental side, there's something called EMP-the Environmental Management Program. EMP rebuilds islands and other habitat that natural forces of an impounded river destroy. The original deal in Congress authorized \$20 million a year.

Congress hasn't lived up to its original authorization, even less to the 1999 inflationary upgrade to \$33.4 million. From year to year, river advocates fight a recurrently losing battle to keep partial funding.

Last year, EMP made important strides toward full funding. This year, however, Congress seems again out to gut the President's budget for EMP. Even though the Bond bill sounds like a reasonable compromise for all the bickering, things are very dicey in Washington. Promises, promises-but so far no Congressional action.

So it's time for a deal. Let's cut to the chase.

It's time for Congress to live up to its commitment to navigation and time for Congress to address the major environmental, recreational, and quality-of-life issues of an impounded river.

There's more at stake than just towing and the environment. For most of us, the tourist, recreational, and quality-of-life interests will always be the most important and the hardest to organize for appropriate consideration. Happily, drawdowns and other recent engineering miracles can serve both environment and tourist, recreation, and quality-of-life interests.

Academic studies that ignore previous commitments have cost years of EMP funding.

Enough of talk a lot, pick a little more.

Let's get working on the river.