

River road: Delays on the Ohio are a necessary pain

Monday, May 24, 2010
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Most of us are familiar with summer road construction that makes life miserable for drivers. But in a city of three rivers, there are highways and there are waterways -- and this month delays on the rivers have underscored the fact that important improvements to transportation infrastructure are not limited to land.

Earlier this month, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers hosted a stakeholders tour of the Emsworth Locks and Dams, which are the scene of urgent repairs to keep the locks operating. The work means that tow operators this month face costly delays of 15 or 16 hours to do what is usually accomplished in two.

This is stimulus funding in action. In April, with the dams at Emsworth having been rated as critically near failure, the corps awarded a \$17.6 million recovery act contract to stabilize severe erosion and replace deteriorated gates. In total, the corps has received \$104 million in stimulus funding for 23 locks and dams in this region, funding critical to the economic well-being of this area.

Pittsburgh is one of the biggest inland ports in the nation, but it would be hard to guess this from the aging and dilapidated state of the locks and dams that keep the river traffic moving. Emsworth was constructed in 1922 with a new dam added in 1938; Dashields in Crescent was constructed in 1929 and Montgomery near Industry, Beaver County, in 1936.

The Emsworth dams create the Pittsburgh pool, without which people could wade across the rivers in summer. The work at Emsworth is a part of a \$160 million rehabilitation project at the site. A long-range plan scheduled to be completed in November of next year -- the Upper Ohio Navigation Study -- will describe what further needs to be done long-term to rebuild or replace locks.

As the problems being addressed at Emsworth are a reminder, adequate federal funding for locks and dams is a must. Barge traffic can move more cargo at a cheaper rate using less fuel with fewer emissions (according to one study, a 15-barge tow has the same capacity as 1,050 trucks).

Before roads existed around Pittsburgh, the rivers were the roads. They can't be taken for granted -- as the necessary delays on the Ohio this month make clear.