

# Corn Growers Denounce USDA's Inaction On Upper Mississippi River

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — The National Corn Growers Association (NCGA) recently publicly chastised the USDA for its inactivity on the issue of improving the transportation infrastructure on the upper Mississippi River.

Addressing the USDA's Agricultural Transportation Summit in St. Louis, Tim Burrack, a corn grower from Arlington, Iowa, and a member of the NCGA Production and Stewardship Action Team, rebuked the USDA for its failure to fulfill commitments made two years ago.

"In 1998, USDA held a summit similar to this one to determine the transportation needs of American agriculture," said Burrack. "One key point from that meeting was that American farmers saw the dire need for improving locks on the upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers. Two years ago, it seemed the USDA got the message, touting various Memorandums of Understanding with the Department of Transportation and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It now appears only the Corps has honored those documents."

For several years, the NCGA and other leading agricultural groups have pressed for improvements to locks and dams on the upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers in order to maintain the United States' competitive edge in the global grain trade. Major competitors of U.S. farmers — Argentina, Brazil and China — continue to invest hundreds of millions of dollars into their transportation systems and dramatically reduce their costs for moving grain for export.

The NCGA has actively



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endorsed the Corps' completion of the Upper Mississippi River Navigation Study. That study will outline the economic and environmental benefits of doubling the size of seven locks from 600 feet to 1,200 feet and lengthening guidewalls on five other locks. The 15-year project would cost \$1.2 billion. A lock and dam users' trust fund would pay \$600 million with the U.S. Treasury paying the other half.

"NCGA is particularly interested in this study because the upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers are the primary artery for U.S. corn and bean exports," Burrack said. "Every year, more than one billion bushels of corn move toward export markets on these waterways."

Since the summit more than two years ago, Burrack said, the Corps and agricultural groups have repeatedly asked USDA to provide information and expertise to

the study — requests that have fallen on deaf ears.

"Much of the current debate surrounding economics of the upper Mississippi study could be put to rest if USDA would only commit the resources necessary to find the correct answer," said Burrack. "Instead, we see a USDA that just wants to hold an occasional meeting and perpetuate the myth that it is representing American agriculture."

Burrack pointed out that since the 1998 summit, foreign markets have continued to expand while "the Corps has met the study deadline with delays and USDA has continued to duck its responsibilities as the governmental representative of U.S. agricultural interests."

USDA has been correct in pointing out that the salvation for American agriculture is through foreign trade, Burrack noted. But he warned that if the necessary infrastructure to meet expanding global demand is not put in place, the U.S. is itself opening up foreign markets for its competitors. "If we are going to grow our export markets, USDA must stop ignoring the needs of the upper Mississippi River," he said.

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