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Port designation leads to federal funding

By Tom Doran

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Singh

QUINCY, Ill. — The newly-designated Corn Belt Ports have reaped the benefits of the federal recognition with increased investments from state and federal governments and nonprofit organizations.

The Port Statistical Areas, or PSAs, that make up the Corn Belt Ports include the Illinois River and Waterway Ports and Terminals PSA, Mid-America Port Commission PSA and Upper Mississippi River Ports PSA and collectively are

equivalent to the 17th largest port in the United States and the nation's largest inland port.

The designation was federally approved in 2021 and, in turn, received major funding this year for improvements.

“There was a \$1.24 billion investment in the region's three ports through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, including nearly \$309.18 million for the Illinois waterways,” said Chris Smith, Corn Belt Ports director of operations.

The federal investments include nearly \$225.84 million for Brandon Road Lock and Dam located on the Des Plaines River near Joliet, \$83.34 million for Illinois Waterway operations and maintenance backlog, and \$550,000 for operations and maintenance backlog at the LaGrange Lock and Dam on the Illinois River near Beardstown.

Other projects include retrofitting Lock and Dam 25 on the Mississippi River with a modern 1,200-foot lock at a cost of \$732 million and \$49.999 million for operations and maintenance backlogs at Locks and Dams 11 to 22 on the Upper Mississippi River.

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— Robert Sinkler, executive coordinating director, Tri-State Corn Belt Ports

About \$35 million from the state of Illinois came into the three port regions. That included \$13.1 million to Mid-America Intermodal Port Authority at Quincy; \$12 million to the Upper Mississippi River Ports for land acquisition, remediation and utilities; \$9.7 million for the Ottawa Port District's intermodal rail yard; and \$5

million for the Mississippi River International Port District at East Dubuque for rail and fertilizer storage improvements

The state of Illinois' Energy and Water Omnibus Bill included nearly \$265 million, with over \$125 million for the Upper Mississippi River Ports, nearly \$76.6 million for Illinois Waterway Ports and \$63.18 for the Tri-State Mid-America Port Commission area.

“This is really a good news story. Last year when the U.S. Coastal and Inland Navigation System transportation and facts information was published, we had information from each of the three port statistical areas. The Mid-American Port had 15 million tons of domestic material, the Illinois Waterway Ports had 14.9 million tons and the Eastern Iowa and Western Illinois Port had 8.4 million tons,” Smith said.

Roughly 65 million tons of commodities were moved through the Upper Mississippi in 2020, and more than half of that was represented within the ag communities. That includes nearly 16.074 tons of corn and nearly 15.697 tons of soybeans.

The Illinois River had nearly 29 million tons of commodities in 2020, including about 6.212 million tons of corn and 4.969 million tons of soybeans.

Ecosystem

The infrastructure bill investments also enabled construction to begin on the long awaited \$3.9 billion Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program.

“There are three ecosystem restoration programs in the Corn Belt Ports region. The Upper Mississippi River Restoration that mostly focuses on the river channel in the Mississippi and Illinois rivers. The Illinois River Basin Restoration program focuses on restoration efforts on the Illinois River and its tributaries,” said Anshu Singh, of Western Illinois University's Institute of Environmental Services.

“NESP is more comprehensive and includes the Illinois and Mississippi river channels, as well as the Illinois River and its tributaries. This program also extends the efforts into the floodplain of both rivers.

“NESP is kind of a unique program which has the dual purpose that focuses on both navigation and ecosystem.”

NESP was formed in 2007, but this marked the first time the program was funded under an infrastructure act.

“These programs are important because we are in an ag dominant region. In the past 150 years, the majority of wetlands have been destroyed. In Iowa alone, over 90% of wetlands have been drained for agriculture or development. Aquatic habitat improvements in the navigation pools and in the floodplains of the Upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers help regionally mitigate for wetland loss,” Singh said.

Economic Benefits

Efforts to get the ports federally recognized began three years ago.

“Prior to 2020, there were no recognized ports inside the lock and dam system, and we wanted to get that fixed with an attempt to try and raise the visibility of the value of waterborne commerce in the region and attract additional investment,” said Robert Sinkler, Tri-State Corn Belt Ports executive coordinating director.

The National Ports GIS database map in 2019 did not include inland ports along the Illinois River and Upper Mississippi River despite the fact that about 100 million tons of freight is moved within the region.

“We just wanted to get on the map and get on the scoreboard. We were able to get the Corn Belt ports added in 2020-2021 to the national ports database. Collectively we were successful in getting every 41 riverfront counties in a three-state region inside the lock and dam system recognized as part of an inland port,” Sinkler said.

“We felt that the farmers in our region definitely needed a U.S. principal port of loading which they never had before from a federal government perspective. It was very difficult for us to make an argument to invest in our new 1,200-foot locks and dams, for example. It came across that we were asking for bridges from nowhere.

“So, by getting the ports federally recognized we could at least say for the first time in history that 1,200-foot locks or investment in our navigation infrastructure created a reliable connection between the ports and the heart of the Corn Belt and global markets.

“We could not say that before just because we did not have the ports recognized federally. We were very successful in 2022 to attract a significant amount of investment.”

The vision the collective team sees in the next phase of the Corn Belt Ports is to amplify the national and global significance of the equivalent of largest inland ports in the nation and promote and attract investment in the development of the maritime multimodal system throughout the region.

“All of this is really done to attract investment and improve and prioritization for investment in our region as associated with everything from new navigation construction to lock and dam rehabilitation to operations and maintenance of existing infrastructure to restoring the Mississippi and Illinois waterways, as well as promote multimodal transportation system improvements that interface with our waterways,” Sinkler said.

He believes “the sky’s the limit” on how the port recognition can be used to advance a wide range of economic objectives by local governments in the counties and the cities.

“There was someone we talked to in every county who said something to the effect that this is a great idea and this should have been done a long time ago, it should

have been done 100 years ago, or why hasn't this been done before? I just think everyone embraced that benefit immediately," Sinkler said.

"You can't invest in a port that doesn't exist and I think we've got a lot of creative people out there involved with our economic development activities that can see the benefit and figure out how to leverage this federal recognition to bring more resources and investment back into region and highlight the value of waterborne commerce in general.

"There're also opportunities to invest on the ecosystem restoration side of things in a way that can improve ecotourism and support other recreational activities. There's a regional and local benefit from all this investment that we're talking about. You can't invest \$4 billion-plus over the next 15 years and have it not be a major improvement to the region."

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