

# Low Mississippi Threatens Barge Traffic Again

HELENA-WEST HELENA, ARK.

Low Mississippi River levels are again putting the squeeze on shipping, with Arkansas' 2012 harvest hobbling out on less-than-full barges.

The Mississippi, the nation's largest river system, drains all or parts of 31 states and two Canadian provinces. Its watershed covers about 1.25 million square miles, or 41 percent of the United States' landmass. For hundreds of years, the river has been a critical highway for agricultural and other products. According to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the river and its tributaries moved 487 million tons of cargo in 2008.

However, widespread and prolonged drought this year meant there's been little to drain into its 2,350-mile length. In August, levels were so low that shipping was halted briefly. (See "Grain piles up as drought-lowered Mississippi River slows barges," <http://bit.ly/11baqNY>)

"All of our ports at Helena are open," Robert Goodson, Phillips and Lee county extension agent for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said Thursday. "Barges are leaving at about 70 percent full."

When the navigation channel is shallow, shippers pack lighter loads allow the barges to sit higher in the water, known as reducing draft. Draft is the minimum depth at which a boat can navigate a waterway.

The port at Osceola, in Mississippi County, was closed earlier this year due to low water, but is open thanks to dredging in late September and October. The only lower Mississippi harbor closed as of Tuesday was Northwest Tennessee Port Harbor, which was scheduled for dredging into early December.

For grain merchandisers, a shallower river means more costs, Scott Stiles, extension economist for the University of Arkansas System Division of Agriculture, said on Friday.

"By reducing drafts, a merchandiser has to use more barges to move the same volume of grain you normally move," he said. The lower river also "reduces the number of barges the towboat can push at one time."

The low water has shippers worried. On Tuesday, the American Waterways Operators, National Waterways Conference, Waterways Council, and 15 other organizations asked President Obama for a presidential declaration of

emergency. The groups are asking the president to direct the Corps of Engineers to:

- Remove exposed rock pinnacles near Thebes and Grand Tower, Ill., and
- Release an amount of water from Missouri River reservoirs that would preserve the river's 9-foot shipping channel.

If no significant rain appears by Dec. 11, "we could see impacts to navigation. The Coast Guard will issue a warning to the navigation industry that 'you don't have a reliable 9-foot deep, 300-foot-wide channel'," said Bob Anderson, chief of public affairs for the Army Corps of Engineers' Mississippi Valley Division. "You cannot maintain it if you have little to no water in the system."

Anderson said that upstream reservoirs are "tapped out now. We're really depending on the rain."

"We got a 10-foot bump from Sandy in the lower Mississippi below Cairo," he said. Water falling in western New York, Pennsylvania and West Virginia all drain into tributaries of the Mississippi. The Engineers are hoping West Coast "Pineapple Express" fronts and storms up the East Coast will help put water back in the system.

"If an area covering several hundred square miles gets an inch of rain, that could equal several feet on the Mississippi River gauge," he said.

The river users group warned of dire consequences if the river had to close to traffic; halting \$7 billion in products, including \$2.3 billion in agricultural products at risk in December and January.

For now, the river is working in favor of Arkansas' corn and soybean growers.

"There's an economic bonus for our growers because the river south of Cairo is open and the commodities can be shipped," Stiles said. Soybean growers were receiving a basis 55 cents above the Chicago Board of Trade, while corn growers were getting 28 cents above CBOT.

After the first of the year, the challenge for farmers up and down the Mississippi is whether needed fertilizer will be able to come up the river from New Orleans. "If the river is closed, you can move fertilizer by truck or rail, but that would move at a slower pace and at a higher cost," he said. Δ



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