

Corps kicks off study of Ohio River and tributaries

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is launching a comprehensive study of the Ohio River, extending to its major Tennessee and Cumberland River tributaries, to identify the most pressing problems and water resource needs associated with the waterway. The corps seeks input from local, state and federal agencies as well as environmental nonprofit groups about what's right and wrong about the river and what needs attention.

Corps studies project manager S. Michael Worley of the Huntington District in West Virginia said factors to be considered include flood damage reduction, environmental qualities for fish and wildlife habitat, water quality and supply, electrical generation from hydropower plants, navigation, and the status of water resource infrastructures including locks and dams along the river and tributaries. Steve Crowley, executive vice president of Marquette Transportation, said the view from the towing industry is one of concern for a deteriorating infrastructure on the Ohio River.

"Since river transportation is the cheapest, most environmentally friendly form of moving goods, it makes no sense not to continue to upgrade the infrastructure system," Crowley said. He said the nation depends on materials and wares moved cost effectively through the system of locks and dams, and municipalities hinge on water supplies and water levels maintained by the infrastructure. "I'd hate to think about what it would do to transportation or water levels and the people that depend on them if one of the locks and dams just quit working," he said. Crowley alluded to inefficiency and risk taking in the slow progress in building Olmsted Locks and Dam -- now reportedly scheduled for completion in 2018 -- while Dam 52 and 53, which it is supposed to replace, continue to operate "way, way beyond their normal life expectancy."

Tourism interests around Kentucky and Barkley lakes, meanwhile, for years have called for holding more water back during the late summer months to extend the period of higher lake levels as a means to encourage more boating and lengthen the visitation season. U.S. Rep. Ed Whitfield has championed that over the past couple of years, even introducing legislation to extend the period of summer pool level and to defer the lowering of the elevation. Managers for the corps themselves, plus TVA managers (for the canal-linked Kentucky Lake) and fish and wildlife agencies have recommended staying with the present water elevation schedule. Fish and wildlife managers say earlier experimentation with higher-longer water schedules showed damages to shoreline vegetation and poorer habitat for fish and wildlife.

Doug Henley, Ohio River fisheries biologist for the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources, said the Ohio essentially is holding in status quo for fisheries now. "There aren't any real big issues right now other than the plans for a hydropower plant at the Cannelton Dam (near Hawesville) and projections for one at Meldahl Dam (near Covington), where there are prospects for fishermen to be closed out of the tailwaters for security reasons," Henley said. "About 90 percent of the fishing on the river is found in about 1 percent of the water, that in the tailwaters, and there's a chance fishermen are going to have access problems around those hydropower plants," he said.

Henley also said water quality that affects sport and commercial fishing and plays into municipal water supplies apparently is holding at a desirable level, far better than it was decades ago when environmental protection laws were just taken effect. The corps requests that agencies and groups with an interest in commenting for the study to provide input through a study Web site at www.orboutreach.com. The deadline for comment is set for Sept. 30.

The corps projects a draft report of public input to be available on the Web page by the end of October, while the study is expected to be completed in December. The study may result in a basin-wide water management plan and reinvestment strategy as well as a multi-state collaboration with the corps, an agency spokesman said.
