The Big River Coalition requests increased federal support for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS) to include all presently approved sensors by increasing the total annual allocation to $15 million. NOAA indicated the current annual PORTS appropriation is $5 million, the increase of $10 million would fund the annual Operations and Maintenance (O&M) costs of the national PORTS program. The PORTS sensors provide invaluable critical data that is utilized by maritime professionals to make critical informed decisions to promote navigational safety.

The Operations and Maintenance costs for the PORTS program has been funded by a variety of different agreements with local sponsors that has historically placed the PORTS sensors in jeopardy of being turned off. There are 33 established NOAA PORTS throughout the country and each has their own method and ability to fund the annual O&M costs. By increasing PORTS funding by $10 million per year NOAA could continue the ongoing operations and maintenance, perform emergency maintenance, and recapitalization responsibilities for all oceanographic sensors of the existing PORTS presently paid for by the partners. This appropriations increase would also afford NOAA the ability to fund and maintain three new PORTS suites at Kings Bay, GA, Coos Bay, OR and Honolulu, HI and to modernize all present and future PORTS. This level of federal funding would also allow NOAA to fund their newly approved Precision Navigation projects on the Lower Mississippi River and New York/New Jersey.

NOAA’s Physical Oceanographic Real-Time System (PORTS) sensors are critical to maintain navigational safety on the five deep-draft ports situated on the MRSC comprising the Lower Mississippi River Deep-Draft Ports Complex specifically the ports of: Baton Rouge, South Louisiana, New Orleans, St. Bernard and Plaquemines – along 256 miles of the Mississippi River Ship Channel (Baton Rouge to the Gulf of Mexico). This Ports Complex is a true economic superhighway annually responsible for 7,500 ships transits (or 15,000 in and out) and over 500,000 barge movements transferring over 500 million tons of cargo each year. Over 60% of the nation’s grain exports and 20 % of the nation’s coal exports annually transit the MRSC.

Early on the morning of October 12, 2018, there was an allision between a crane on barge being transported upriver by a tow boat and the Sunshine Bridge over the Mississippi River Ship Channel at Mile 167.4 Above Head of Passes that caused severe damage to the Bridge. This allision caused severe damage to the load-bearing components of the Bridge and had a significant impact on local vehicular traffic. Repairs required the
roadway to be closed and periods of one lane traffic across Louisiana State Highway 70 (LA Hwy 70). The Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development (LDOTD) estimated that 25,000 commuters per day had to find alternate routes with significant delays and increased travel distances (up to 50 miles in each direction). LA Hwy 70 is heavily relied upon by commercial truck traffic moving cargoes to and from the numerous facilities in this area of the Mississippi River Ship Channel (MRSC). LDOTD acknowledges that emergency services and school schedules have been impacted and closures continue as the repairs are not expected to be completed until mid-February.

There are six bridges that span over the Mississippi River Ship Channel from Baton Rouge to New Orleans, in descending order the Baton Rouge I-10 Bridge at Mile 229.3 AHP; the Sunshine Bridge; Gramercy Bridge at Mile 145.9 AHP; LA State Highway 310 Bridge (Hale Boggs) at Mile 121.6 AHP; Huey P. Long Bridge at Mile 106.1 AHP and the two bridges of the Crescent City Connection at Mile 95.8 AHP and 95.7 AHP. Only the lowest two bridges, the Huey P. Long and Crescent City Connection have PORTS Air Gap sensors. The increased appropriations would allow the establishment of the Air Gap sensor on the uppermost Bridge that crosses over the MRSC, this Air Gap sensor was recently approved by NOAA after requests from both the New Orleans – Baton Rouge Steamship Pilots Association and the Big River Coalition. Although, a willing sponsor for the O&M costs has yet to be identified and there remains no movement to activate this Air Gap sensor.

Please consider fully funding NOAA’s programs so that mariners can utilize the real-time data to promote safe navigation decisions, the damage at the Sunshine Bridge has an economic impact in the tens of millions while the national PORTS program can be fully funded at $10 million a year. Please note that I am a member of NOAA’s Hydrographic Services Review Panel and have enclosed an issue paper on the PORTS Program, the following quote is reproduced from this paper:

“Increased use of the Nation’s waterways in the movement of good and people in all major U.S. ports and harbors is becoming more complex as:

- vessels are becoming larger;
- waterway congestion is increasing;
- security arrangements are becoming more stringent;
- climate change is forcing a need of for resiliency planning;
- newly dredged channels are creating new hydraulic and bathymetric challenges;
- restricted waterways require precise data for safe navigation; and
- data needs to be made available on-shore, aboard ship, and on numerous devices.

CHALLENGES

Established in 1991, PORTS measures and disseminates observations and predictions of water levels, currents, salinity, bridge clearance, and meteorological parameters (e.g., winds, atmospheric pressure, air, and water temperatures) that mariners need to navigate safely and efficiently.”…

The Big River Coalition is committed to “Advocating for a Mightier Mississippi River” to ensure the future of unimpeded navigation on the Mississippi River Ship Channel (MRSC) as one of the nation’s fundamental natural resources and a true economic powerhouse. The Mississippi River and Tributaries project has an estimated $ 735.7 billion annual impact on the nation’s economy and is responsible for approximately 2.4 million jobs (585,000 jobs on the Lower River – Cairo, IL to the Gulf of Mexico and 1.86 million plus jobs on the Upper River-Lake Itasca, MN to Cairo, IL and including the IL River).

Sincerely,
Sean M. Duffy, Sr.
Executive Director