PORT DREDGING

Globalization may have changed many aspects of American life, but one thing still is constant: the United States remains a maritime nation. Seven years into the 21st century, U.S. ports continue to play an indispensable role in America's defense and economic life.

U.S. ports and waterways handle more than 2 billion tons of domestic and import/export cargo annually. By 2020, the total volume of cargo is expected to double.

Much of the total domestic production of basic commodities and finished products—items such as corn, lumber, iron ore, steel, phosphates, potatoes, machinery and modular homes—is shipped by water. About two-thirds of all U.S. wheat and wheat flour, one-third of soybean and rice production and almost two-fifths of U.S. cotton production is exported through U.S. ports.

Moreover, the Department of Defense has designated two dozen ports as being essential in the mobilization, deployment and resupplyment of U.S. forces during major conflicts. U.S. ports and their commercial partners have been instrumental in assisting the deployment of troops and materials for Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Given these facts, it is disappointing to note that the budget for dredging submitted by the administration contains only a slight increase from last year. Overall, the administration is requesting $4.871 billion for the Army Corps of Engineers' Civil Works program. As the American Association of Port Authorities recently noted, this still is about $1 billion short of what is needed to ensure that U.S. ports remain capable of handling the volume of ships from all categories that are found in the world's maritime fleets.

The situation is particularly acute on the Great Lakes, which has long been shortchanged when it comes to government spending on port modernization. Corps per capita spending on Great Lakes dredging amounted to $0.52 per ton carried last year. In contrast, per capita spending on the Missouri River amounted to 30 times that amount, or $15 per ton of cargo carried. Because of this slight, the Great Lakes region faces a backlog of over $200 million in operation and maintenance requirements.

The matter is compounded by the failure of the last Congress to amend the Water Resources Development Act that would have corrected a serious shortcoming in existing law. While

two-thirds of all U.S. shipping begins or ends at small ports, these very ports are excluded from federal funding.

The U.S. and Great Lakes navigational system is more than the sum of its parts. By failing to fund dredging at small and rural ports, great harm is done to America's entire waterways industry, not to mention the nation's economy. By pursuing a policy that shortchanges Great Lakes harbors and channels, the federal government is making it impossible for the industry to meet the transportation needs of vitally important industries in the region. Improperly dredged channels and harbors translate into higher costs and delayed cargo shipments.

The Maritime Trades Department, its affiliates and its Port Maritime Councils strongly support a recent observation of the Great Lakes Task Force: "The Great Lakes are a national treasure and central to America's shipping infrastructure. Our country cannot afford to neglect the maintenance of the harbors along the nation's fourth coast."

The MTD calls on the federal government to implement an efficient and thorough system to dredge America's ports, from the Great Lakes to the deep seas.