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Bolster port security

Washington must do its share

By Bernard Groseclose

Look at the shoes you're wearing today. Or the coffee you're drinking. Or the car you drove to work. Chances are good these everyday items made their way into your life through a U.S. seaport. And you probably never gave a second thought to how those products traveled from China, Colombia or Japan.

That's exactly the way goods movement is supposed to work — it should be seamless and invisible, yet utterly reliable, efficient and secure.

On the export side, ports help American businesses from every state develop and maintain overseas markets for a variety of commodities, ranging from paper, forest and agricultural products, to plastics, chemicals and pharmaceuticals; from fruits and vegetables to poultry, beef and cotton; and from machinery and automobile parts to frozen fish.

Ports are vital to the movement of goods and passengers, and to America's economy. More than 99 percent of overseas cargo arrives or departs via seaports. In 2004, more than 8 million passengers embarked on cruises from America's ports. Ports also play a key role in the deployment and resupply of our troops overseas.

When Hurricane Katrina forced ports in the Gulf of Mexico to suspend operations, ripples quickly were felt throughout the U.S. economy—particularly at gas pumps in the Southeast. This recent, unfortunate example is a fresh reminder of how invaluable ports are to the nation. On average, each of our 50 states relies on 13 to 15 U.S. ports to handle its exports and imports.

Unfortunately, the U.S. port industry is facing unprecedented challenges that should concern every American consumer, as well as the president and Congress. If unaddressed, these challenges could weaken the nation's supply chain and economic vitality.

Port security remains a critical issue in this post-September 11 world. International trade is growing at a phenomenal rate, and ports are struggling to keep up with demands on their facilities. With today's cargo volume level expected to at least double by 2020, adequate port infrastructure is a growing concern.

Responsibility for this infrastructure and its security is shared, principally between local public port authorities and the federal government. Public ports pay the lion's share, but it's imperative that the federal government uphold its end of the bargain to ensure that neither security concerns nor infrastructure constraints compromise the ability of U.S. ports to meet consumer demands in the future.

Federal law mandating port security enhancements set up a program in 2002 to help protect port facilities from terrorist attack. This program has been dramatically under-funded, leaving ports no choice but to pay the lopsided balance themselves to ensure that their facilities are safe and secure — not only for the nearly 5 million Americans who earn their livelihoods in the maritime industry, but also for the urban communities near commercial seaports and for the well-being of the nation's economy, in which ports and goods movement play a critical role. The problem is, this has required ports to divert limited funds away from expanding port infrastructure in order to pay for hardening their facilities against terrorism.

While ports must remain safe and secure in the face of terrorist threats, they also must remain accessible. If the flow of cargo through U.S. ports bottlenecks at critical junctures, then transportation costs go up — and consumers ultimately pay this price.

It is critically important that ports have sufficient infrastructure to meet growing trade demands. This includes access by both land (via highway connectors) and water (via federal navigation channels).

When navigation channels are not maintained, they might as well have orange construction cones and blinking "Lane Closed — Merge Left" signs floating on the water. Imagine the traffic jams and long commutes that would occur if part of a major existing highway closed because there was no money to clear debris off.

The federal government collects a fee on imports and domestic cargo to maintain these navigation channels, but the government spends far less on maintaining those channels than it collects each year. As a result, federal navigation channels at ports are not being adequately maintained, while the trust fund has an approximately $3 billion surplus that continues to grow annually. This situation not only increases costs to consumers, but is patently unfair to those who have prepaid the federal government for channel maintenance via this fee.

The release Monday of the president's fiscal 2007 budget presents a timely opportunity to reflect on the nation's commitment to port infrastructure and its security. The U.S. public port industry has urged the federal government to spend at least $400 million per year on port facility security. Ports also have urged the government to spend the money that comes into the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund each year on its stated purpose — maintenance of federal navigation channels. It is vital that the federal government uphold its end of the partnership with public port authorities and help ensure that America's ports remain both secure and efficient.

Secure and efficient ports play a critical role in the seamless, invisible, reliable movement of goods on which our country (and its consumers) depend every day.

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