TAX ASPECTS OF FINANCING THE INLAND WATERWAY SYSTEM

H.R. 8309

Prepared for the Use of the

COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

BY THE STAFF OF THE

JOINT COMMITTEE ON TAXATION



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I. INTRODUCTION

H.R. 8309 has been referred jointly to the Committee on Ways and Means and the Committee on Public Works and Transportation. The bill has been referred to the Committee on Ways and Means for consideration, in title II, of any revenue-raising measure to be imposed on

users of the Federally-maintained inland waterway system.

Titles I and III of H.R. 8309, as ordered reported by the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, would authorize the replacement of locks and dam 26, would specify the inland waterways which are "subject to this Act", and would require the Secretaries of Transportation and Commerce to submit to Congress within three years their report on a study, with recommendations, regarding mechanisms for raising revenue from users of the inland waterways maintained by the Federal government.

II. GENERAL

The inland waterways basically are comprised of all U.S. waterways (other than the intercoastal waterways and the Great Lakes waterways) which are part of the navigable waters of the United States. The inland waterways include navigable rivers and lakes, both natural and artificial, as well as canals, and locks and dams, regardless of private, local or State ownership of those improvements or of the lands underlying or through which the water body runs, so long as the waters are, have been, or may be susceptible of being used for purposes of interstate or foreign commerce. The inland waterways do not include, however, a privately constructed and operated canal which neither is used for purposes of interstate commerce nor is used by the public.

The responsibility for regulating the inland waterway system is imposed upon the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the U.S. Coast Guard. The Corps of Engineers has primary responsibility for the operation, maintenance and improvement of this system. To carry out this responsibility, the Corps of Engineers has developed this system by using locks and dam structures, dredging, and other methods to control the flow of existing rivers in a navigable waterway network. The U.S. Coast Guard is responsible for the formulation and implementation of navigational and safety rules, including the installation and maintenance of channel buoys and warning markers in hazardous

areas.

The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that there are more than 15,000 miles of inland waterways which are at least nine feet deep, and therefore sufficiently navigable to accommodate most modern barge and towboat freight carriers. In addition, there are about 6,300 miles of inland waterways with channels of six feet or less in depth, and approximately 1,250 miles of deep-draft channels. According to the CBO, commercial waterway users carry about 11 percent of domestic freight over this entire inland waterway system. Industry sources estimate that in 1974, 7.6 percent of domestic freight was moved on the inland waterways, excluding the freight carried on the deep-draft channels.

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III. DESCRIPTION OF H.R. 8309

Title I—Replacement of locks and dam 26

As ordered reported by the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, title I of H.R. 8309 would authorize the replacement of locks and dam 26 at an estimated cost of approximately \$432 million (see table 2, in the appendix). The existing locks and dam 26, completed in 1938, are located on the Mississippi River about 18 miles upstream from St. Louis, Missouri, and serve as a key element in the inland waterway system. All waterborne commerce shipped between the Ohio River, the lower Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway and the upper Mississippi or the Illinois River must pass through these locks. Title I would authorize their replacement "substantially in accordance with the recommendations of the Chief of Engineers" in House Doc. 94-584.

- In addition, title I would specify by name and mileage-description 26 rivers or waterway systems as "subject to this Act", rather than define the Federally-maintained inland waterways in general terms. The list includes the Mississippi River (upstream from Baton Rouge), the Mississippi's tributaries, and the Florida-to-Texas Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, which together account for about 85 percent of the U.S. waterway tonnage; the Virginia-to-Florida Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway is also listed. The specified waterways do not include, and hence the bill is not intended to apply with respect to trade on, the Great Lakes, the Saint Lawrence Seaway, and the deepwater harbors (such as San Francisco Harbor). In addition the bill would not apply with respect to intercoastal trade (shipments on the ocean, along and between the U.S. coasts, and to Hawaii or other noncontingous ports of the United States).

The 26 river or waterway systems apparently are specified by the Committee on Public Works and Transportation in anticipation that any fuel tax or other revenue-raising measure added to H.R. 8309 would be made applicable only with respect to users of those inland waterways, and not to users of other inland waterways or deepwater

harbors, etc., which also may be Federally-maintained.

Title II—Provision for any revenue-raising measure

Title II has been left blank for insertion of any revenue-raising measure reported by the Committee on Ways and Means.

Title III—Study on inland waterway user charges

Title III would require the Secretaries of Transportation and Commerce (in consultation with the Secretaries of Agriculture, the Army, and the Treasury and with the Administrator of the Federal Energy Administration or his successor) to undertake a comprehensive study of inland waterway user charges. The report on the study would be submitted to Congress with "policy recommendations" within three years. The study would consider various issues also relevant in structuring any interim revenue-raising measure, including:

(a) determination of the classes and categories of waterway users upon whom any fuel taxes (or other charges) should fall;

(b) determination of which Federally maintained waterways, including ports, should be covered in any fuel tax or other user-charge system;

(c) determination as to the disposition of user-charge revenues,

such as earmarking for waterways maintenance; and

(d) determination of the extent to which the Federal Government, through any fuel tax or other revenue-raising mechanism, should seek to recover all or a specified percentage of Federal expenditures attributable to support of waterborne transportation.

The study also would examine various economic issues related to the waterborne transportation system, including the impact of any user charges on the consumers of products carried on the inland waterways and the effect on energy costs. In addition, the study would review the comparative benefits of Federal waterway expenditures received by users for commerce, recreation, reclamation, water supply, hydroelectric power, flood control, and irrigation purposes. Title III also would provide that within six months after submission of the study, the National Transportation Policy Study Commission would submit to Congress its evaluation and review of that study, together with any legislative recommendations.

IV. PRIOR CONGRESSIONAL ACTION

On May 17, 1977, the House passed H.R. 5885, which authorized appropriations for the construction, repair, and preservation of certain public works on rivers and harbors for navigation and flood control. The House-passed bill did not contain a system of waterway user

charges.

On June 22, 1977, the Senate passed H.R. 5885 with amendments. Senate Amendment 422, which added title III to the bill, (1) would authorize reconstruction of Locks and Dam 26, Mississippi River, Alton, Illinois, and (2) would establish a system for imposition of user "charges" on Federally-maintained inland waterways. Title III of H.R. 5885 does not list specific rivers to be treated as part of the Federally-maintained inland waterways; however, the Great Lakes, their interconnecting channels, and the Saint Lawrence Seaway are expressly excluded. Under the bill, charges would be imposed only on "shallow-draft" cargo vessels using the inland waterways for commercial purposes. Neither recreational vessels nor international traffic would be subject to charges (other than the existing fuel tax

applicable to nondiesel recreational vessels).

Title III of H.R. 5885 also would authorize the Secretary of Transportation, after consultation with the Secretary of the Army, to develop a system of waterway user charges to be phased-in over 10 years, beginning in fiscal year 1980. The Secretary of Transportation would be specifically authorized to utilize, but would not be limited to, one or more of the following revenue mechanisms: license fees; congestion charges; charges based on ton-miles over a given segment; lockage fees; and charges based on the capacity of cargo vessels, loaded and unloaded, over the various segments of the inland waterways of the United States. The schedule of user charges would be assessed annually on the basis of (1) the costs of operating, maintaining, constructing, and rehabilitating the inland waterways; (2) the volume of traffic; (3) seasonal and other repetitive peak demands for use; and (4) any other factors the Secretary of Transportation finds reasonable and equitable. The user charge could not exceed one percent of the value of the commodity after shipment.

The revenues generated by these waterway charges would be deposited in the general Treasury without designation as to use or purpose. The schedule of charges would be set at levels calculated to eventually recover 100 percent of the Federal costs of waterway operations and maintenance and 50 percent of new waterway construction costs, based on appropriations in the preceding fiscal year.

¹ The Secretary of Transportation would be required to conduct public hearings, permit not less than 45 days for public comment, and publish preliminary regulations on a proposed system of user charges within 10 months after the date of enactment. Final regulations would be required no later than January 1, 1979, and would become effective on October 1, 1979, unless disapproved by a joint resolution of Congress within 90 days after transmittal.

V. ISSUES FOR COMMITTEE CONSIDERATION

The principal issues for consideration by the committee include the following:

(1) should a waterway user tax be adopted;

(2) if so, what type of revenue raising mechanism should be adopted;

(3) what should be the level of revenue raised; and

(4) should a trust fund be established.

1. Waterway user tax

The estimated increases in Federal expenditures on the inland waterway system will require that new methods of financing be developed if the increased expenditures are to be financed without additional tax burden to the general public. In recent years, Congress has determined that other forms of transportation must directly bear a portion of the Federal expenditures made on their behalf.

The two major examples are the airway and highway transportation systems. In 1956, the Highway Trust Fund was established by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which imposed or increased taxes on gasoline, special motor fuels and diesel fuel, tires, tubes, and tread rubber, manufacturer's sale of trucks, buses, and truck trailers, and on the gross weight of heavy trucks and buses. At present, there is a 4-cents-a-gallon retailers excise tax on diesel fuel used in highway vehicles, a 4-cents-a-gallon retailers excise tax on other special motor fuels for highway use (with a 2-cents-a-gallon refund or credit for nonhighway use, including motorboat use), and a 4-cents-a-gallon manufacturers excise tax on gasoline (again, with a 2-cents-a-gallon refund or credit for nonhighway use, including motorboat use). ¹

In 1970, in order to provide additional revenues to finance the civil aviation system and to shift a portion of the cost to users of the system, the Airport and Airway Revenue Act of 1970 increased the tax on fuel used by general aviation and the passenger ticket tax on commercial aviation; imposed new taxes on international passenger flights and domestic air freight waybills; and imposed an annual aircraft registration tax. The Act also established the Airport and Airway Trust Fund to assure that the aviation user taxes are expended only for the improvement and maintenance of the air transportation system. Subsequent legislation, however, prevented use of the fund for operations expenditures for the airway system.

Federal expenditures for the costs of the inland waterway transportation system have been financed from general revenues—that is, from taxpayers in general rather than by the direct users of the system. Both past and present Administrations have advocated a waterway users tax to finance (either in whole or in part) the costs of operation and maintenance of the inland waterway system as well as a portion of the costs of new capital construction.

¹ Title II of H.R. 6831, as reported by Ways and Means Committee, would remove the current 2-cents-a-gallon refund or credit as of October 1, 1977.

2. Type of revenue raising mechanism

If the committee decides that a revenue measure should be adopted to finance the inland waterway system, it must decide whether the mechanism should be (1) uniform, i.e., applied evenly among the nation's waterways, or (2) segmented according to the costs of building and maintaining individual waterways. In addition, it is necessary to decide whether the revenue raising measure should be based on such factors as fuel consumption, tonnage, licensing, use of locks and dams, value of cargo shipped, or on some combination of these factors. The factors to be considered would depend, in part, upon whether the mechanism adopted is to be uniform or segmented.

The three types of revenue mechanism most frequently discussed are a uniform system-wide fuel tax, a uniform system-wide user charge based on tonnage factors, and a segmented, specific-fee based on the cost of constructing and maintaining individual waterway systems.

a. Uniform fuel tax

Under this alternative, the revenues to be derived from commercial users of the inland waterways would be raised; in whole or in part, through imposition of a retailers excise tax on fuel consumed in transportation on the waterways. As in the case of the existing retailers excise tax applicable to diesel fuel used in highway motor vehicles, an excise tax applicable to diesel and other fuels used by commercial waterways vessels would be imposed at the same rate regardless of the particular river segments on which the fuels would be consumed.²

A fuel tax (falling primarily on diesel fuel), it is generally agreed, would be relatively easy to administer in comparison with alternative revenue-raising mechanisms. The full tax rate would be collected at the time of sale or use and remitted to the Treasury. Appropriate procedures would be adopted, similar to those for existing fuel excise taxes, to provide tax refunds or credits with respect to tax-paid fuel consumed outside the specified inland waterways. In administering the tax, the Internal Revenue Service could utilize or follow familiar rules and procedures for excise tax returns, tax payments, assessment, collection, audit, etc., and could take advantage of the existing excise tax administrative structure within the Service. From the vessel operator's point of view, the cost of the fuel tax could be readily computed and projected for planning purposes.

The impact of a uniform fuel tax would be spread more evenly over the entire inland waterways system than the impact of segment-specific user charges; that is, studies have concluded that any reduction in barge traffic would probably be spread evenly among the nation's rivers. Correspondingly, if a uniform fuel tax were imposed to recover waterways costs, then users of relatively low-cost rivers in effect would support commercial operations on less utilized and more expensive (in terms of Federal expenditures) segments they do not use.

Studies have concluded that imposition of fuel taxes on commercial waterways users could result in some amount of fuel conservation.

² It appears that segment-specific fuel taxes would not be feasible, since users could probably avoid regional rate differences. Little data seems currently available about variations in fuel use (gallons per ton-mile) by river segment.

b. Uniform user charges

As a second alternative, revenues could be raised from commercial users of the inland waterways through uniform charges based on tonnage. Thus, the aggregate dollar amount to be raised for the Federal Government could be divided by the total tons carried, or tons carried and distance travelled, for the immediate past year or by the expected tonnage for the current year. The resulting uniform fee per ton, or per ton-mile, would be collected from each carrier based on its tonnage, without regard to the Federal costs associated with the particular river segments used by the carrier.

Another form of uniform user charge would be annual vessel license or registration fees. Adoption of this device would require determinations of (1) the proportions of revenues to be raised from each vessel group (towboats, barges, etc.) and (2) the basis for fee imposition within each group (such as horsepower, registered tonnage,

cargo capacity, etc.).

For purposes of recovering Federal outlays on locks, revenues could be raised through uniform lockage fees. This revenue device would have to be supplemented with a fuel tax, segment toll, license fee, or some other imeasure, in order to cover dredging or other expenditures not associated with locks. A lockage fee could be imposed on a uniform systemwide basis, on a uniform river basis, or the basis of each individual lock's expenditures and traffic (assuming the relevant data were available), with differing cost impacts.

c. Segment-specific tolls

Under this alternative, there would be varying fees charged for access to specific segments of the inland waterways, based on the costs to be recovered for that segment. Each segment of the waterways network would have an associated toll applicable to commercial traffic using the segment. As long-haul traffic moved along successive

segments, cumulative tolls would be incurred.

Studies have concluded that a regional fee system could have markedly different impacts on various river segments and might stop virtually all commercial traffic on some higher-cost rivers. In addition, if charges were imposed to cover capital expenditures, their impact would probably be concentrated in the early phases of implementation under a river-specific segment toll, but would be more gradual under a systemwide tax. Thus, it might be desirable to provide relief for new waterways from initial high tolls during the period needed for traffic development. It is argued that specific charges may be more equitable than uniform fees since there would be no implicit "cross-subsidy" from users of relatively low-cost river segments.

Segment-specific tolls could take a variety of forms, including fees based on tonnage or ton-miles; lockage fees (fixed fees per lockage, per lock usage, or per cargo ton, or time-based fees); and vessel license or registration fees. Any revenue-raising mechanism other than a fuel

³ A "ton-mile" is the movement of 1 ton of freight the distance of 1 mile.

⁴ Congressional Budget Office, Financing Waterway Development: The User Charge Debate (July 1977), at p. 39; final report [prepared by CACI, Inc. for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers]. Potential Impacts of Selected Inland Waterway User Charges (Dec. 15, 1976), at pp. 57-60.

tax might require extensive development of Federal administrative procedures and rules for determining the level of charges and methods of imposition, record-keeping and reporting, collection and payment, inspection and audit, enforcement and penalty procedures.

d. Persons and uses subject to tax

If a tax or user charge is imposed to raise a certain amount of revenue from users of the inland waterway systems, a related question for the committee to decide is the classes and categories of waterway

users upon whom the tax should be imposed.

For example, most proposals for an inland waterways user tax would impose a tax only on commercial use and would exempt, for example, recreational use. The committee should also consider whether all business and commercial use of the system is to be subject to tax or only, for example, transporters of property for hire.

3. Level of revenue

A basic issue in designing a waterway user tax to help finance the cost of the inland waterway system is exactly what costs should be included. The Army Corps of Engineers inland waterways expenditures allocated to shallow draft navigation projects is shown in table

1 in the Appendix.

This table shows, by fiscal years 1971 through 1982, the actual and estimated expenditures broken down between construction and operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation. For example, the estimated total outlay for fiscal year 1977 is \$488.7 million, of which \$277.4 million is for construction and \$211.3 million is for operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation. By 1982, the total is projected to reach \$841 million, of which \$533 million would be for construction and \$308 million would be for operations, etc.

There appears to be substantial agreement that only prospective construction and operating costs should be considered and that there should be no attempt to recapture through a tax the cost of previous

investment in the waterway system.

A more controversial question is what percentage of costs should be recovered as to both operation and maintenance of the waterway

system and new capital construction.

The comparison with other user charges is helpful, but not entirely adequate. All Federal highway aid is financed by road user fees but the Federal Government does not finance repair and maintenance, and the mix between commercial and noncommercial highway users is different from that of the inland waterways system. The airway user charges originally were intended to cover, after a ten-year period, all the operation, maintenance, and capital costs allocated to civilian users of the airway system, but the subsequent change in the use of the air trust fund revenues has diverted a significant part of the revenues to airport construction costs and airway facilities and equipment capital costs.

⁵ Gasoline and special motor fuels used in motorboats are currently subject to a 4-cents-a-gallon tax (of which 2 cents is refunded or credited). The revenue from the net 2-cents-a-gallon tax is transferred to the Land and Water Conservation Fund via the Highway Trust Fund. (Title II of H.R. 6831, as reported by the Ways and Means Committee, would remove the current 2-cents-a-gallon refund or credit as of October 1977.)

It has been proposed that the user charge should be set at levels calculated to eventually recover 100 percent of the costs of operating and maintaining the inland waterway system and 50 percent of the costs of new construction. It is estimated that the level of fuel tax necessary to satisfy this requirement for fiscal year 1977 would be approximately 40 to 42 cents per gallon. This would generate approximately \$350 million (approximately \$210 million for operating costs and \$140 million for one-half of construction costs). This would translate into approximately two mills per ton-mile in the case of a user charge based on tonnage per mile.

Because of the difficulty in determining the various economic impacts on the waterway users, it has been suggested that the committee adopt a moderate fuel tax at the present time, with further study of alternative revenue raising mechanisms and the allocation of system costs and charges to different users. It is agreed that such a study be completed in three years. A fuel tax would be easy to administer and would establish the principle of applying the user charge concept to waterway users. Further, if a significant tax is to be imposed, there is good argument for phasing it in gradually to minimize the adverse effects on the industry especially with regard to the competitiveness of waterway transportation with railroad and truck transportation.

The economic impacts of a 4-cents-a-gallon fuel tax would be small. The 4-cents tax is estimated to raise \$35 million. If this is all reflected in higher prices, the effect on the consumer price index will be too small to measure. On the basis of representative charges for various commodities, a 4-cents-a-gallon tax would increase barge transportation rates about one-half of one percent. This increase is substantially less than one percent of the value of the product being shipped.

4. Use of a trust or general fund

If the committee decides to impose a user charge, it should also decide whether the revenues should be deposited in a trust fund from which expenditures benefiting the waterway system would be made. In the transportation area, the trust fund concept has been used in the Federal financing of the airway and highway systems. In the case of the Highway Trust Fund, the various highway user tax revenues are deposited into the fund, and appropriations are made out of the fund for specified highway-related purposes. No general revenues go into the Highway Trust Fund (other than the interest earned on the fund investment). In the case of the Airport and Airway Trust Fund, most Federal air transportation system expenses are paid for from other than air user charges (i.e., general fund revenues), so that the airway trust fund is not a complete airport and airway funding system.

Arguments used in favor of establishing the airway and highway trust funds emphasized the desirability of having specific funds earmarked and set aside for Federal expenditures that directly benefited these modes of transportation. Proponents of the trust fund concept claimed that such funds provide greater predictability in planning for such expenditures, as the programs involve long-range financial commitments by the Federal Government. Moreover, the users could readily determine that their user taxes paid were being allocated to

 $^{^6\,\}mathrm{From}$ "Iowa DOT (Staff) Waterway User Charge Proposal," Iowa Department of Transportation, p. 9.

pay for Federal expenditures on related projects. For example, specific limiting language was included in the airway and highway trust fund legislation so that only certain types of expenditures could be made out of the trust funds. Further, it was asserted that a trust fund would give Congress a mechanism to better evaluate the relationship between the user revenues and the related Federal costs by requiring annual reports on the status of the funds and projected fund revenues and

Opponents of the trust fund concept argue that this method of financing Federal expenditures creates undue rigidity in the budget process by earmarking certain revenues only to specific programs. In other words, if specific tax revenues are available only for limited purposes, the Government's fiscal flexibility is said to be restricted. Also, opponents maintain that certain programs may not receive sufficient budget scrutiny where specific revenues are guaranteed or set aside for a given purpose and that all Federal programs should have to compete on the same basis in the appropriations process. In addition, it is pointed out that a trust fund mechanism is not necessary to make use of the user tax concept, as it is said to be merely a budget bookkeeping method of accounting for the tax receipts and the designated expenditures. Under a unified budget concept, it is asserted that it makes no meaningful fiscal difference to establish a specific trust fund or account to transfer Federal funds. Further, it is argued that trust funds should not be used where the user charge is not expected to recover a high percentage of the costs of the system since the extra recordkeeping involved in managing a separate trust fund outweighs any benefit from segregation of the funds. For example, it is unlikely that revenues from user charges which fall short of expenditures would be diverted to unrelated spending programs to the detriment of the user of the system. An annual report to the Congress from the Departments of Treasury and Transportation on the amount of revenues from user charges and the amount of expenditures for the system could provide the information needed for congressional oversight of the operation of the system.

VI. ADMINISTRATION POSITION

The Administration believes that a system of waterway user charges should be adopted. When fully effective, the Administration's program would call for taxes and/or fees covering all of the maintenance and operating costs and one-half of the capital costs relating to the shallow draft inland waterways. These user charges would be phased in over

a 10-year period.

The Administration has suggested alternative means of assessing waterway user charges. One alternative is a tax on the diesel fuel and residual fuel oil used in vessels. Another approach would involve a system of toll and lockage fees, perhaps reflecting the cost of individual segments of the waterways system. The Administration also suggested that the fuel tax and toll and lockage fees mechanism could be combined to raise the desired revenue. Whichever user charge system is adopted, the Administration recommends against the establishment of a trust fund to accumulate user charge revenues.

VII. APPENDIX: DATA ON WATERWAYS EXPENDITURES

Table 1.—Army Corps of Engineers Inland Waterways Expenditures as Allocated to Shallow Draft Navigation Projects, by Type of Expenditure

[In millions of dollars]

Fiscal year	Construction	Operations, maintenance, and rehabilitation	Total
1081		100.0	
1971	194. 7	100. 3	295.0
$1972_{}$	214.2	102. 5	316. 7
1973	185. 9	117. 9	303. 8
1974	195. 7	163.0	358. 7
1975	$222.\ 5$	161.6	384. 1
1976	270. 1	173. 7	443.8
1977 1	277.4	2 11. 3	488.7
1978 1	3 56. 2	221.6	577.8
1979 1	380. 0	240.0	620. 0
1980 1	423.0	261.0	684. 0
1981 1	481.0	283.0	764. 0
1982 1	533.0	308.0	841.0

¹ Estimated.

Note.—The above figures include portions of multiple-purpose projects as allocated by the Army Corps of Engineers to navigation systems. They do not cover costs allocated by the Corps to U.S. Coast Guard, Fish and Wildlife, and recreation projects. They do not cover proposed capital construction expenditures for locks and dam 26.

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, unpublished data. The projections for fiscal years 1979–82, which were provided in 1978 constant dollars, have been transformed into current dollar figures assuming that annual price inflation will be 5.5 percent.

Table 2.—U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Possible Construction Schedule and Allocation of Funds, Locks and Dam 26 ¹ (Assuming Congressional Authorization)

	Construction, general funding		Construction, general funding
Fiscal year:	(millions)	Fiscal year—Cont.	(millions)
1st	\$15	$4 h_{}$	65
2d	35	5th	45
3d	55	Balance to com	plete 176

 $^{^1\,\}rm Based$ on \$391 million estimate as of January 1976. The estimate was revised in October 1976 to \$421 million. An additional \$11 million is to be spent on a study.

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, unpublished data.

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