

Transport Official Warns Of Infrastructure Shortfall

By Capt. Richard Eberhardt

The wave of trade coming from Asia will overwhelm the United States' ability to handle freight if major revisions are not made quickly, said John Horsley, president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO).

"We're facing a shock of major proportions and most politicians haven't got it," Horsley said.

Representatives of 17 state transportation departments were given a detailed insight into the growing needs that increased intermodal (container) transportation of freight will place on an already overburdened infrastructure, at a conference in New Orleans May 25–27.

The conference was a joint meeting of AASHTO's Standing Committee on Water Transportation (SCOWT) and the Heartland Intermodal Partnership (HIP), a group of government and industry representatives from 24 mid-America states organized by the U.S. Maritime Administration (MarAd). Inland Rivers Ports & Terminals (IRPT) hosted the meeting.

With highways already heavily congested and many rail lines at or near capacity, transportation officials in government and private industry must scramble to deal with the anticipated influx of containerized freight. Container-on-barge, improved terminal facilities, dredging and short-sea shipping are the obvious options.

Report Planned

One of the results of the conference was the establishment of a committee to report on the ability of water transportation to ease congestion problems and the "red flags" that will arise in that mode.

"And we don't need to take 18 months to complete the report," said Larry "Butch" Brown, executive director of the Mississippi Department of Transportation and chairman of SCOWT. Brown's urgency is based on freight already backing up in some areas.

"We have to produce a report that, within a 10-minute presentation, will make enough noise that will make enough people nervous enough to take action," Brown said.

Leo Penne, AASHTO's program director for intermodal and industry activities, will direct the report committee.

Intermodal transportation incorporates highway, rail, air and water transportation, Brown explained. They are interrelated and each can help the other.

AASHTO recently released a comprehensive report on rail transportation that showed, for the first time, intermodal cargo is the largest freight revenue source for the railroads, eclipsing bulk cargo. The new report will focus on marine freight transportation.

In providing information to consultants for the waterborne report, Brown requested that each state representative identify congestion choke points so they can be addressed.

‘Red Flags’

A former mayor of Natchez, Miss., Brown said raising the “red flags” and addressing ways to alleviate them should be a major emphasis of the report. He pointed to congestion issues in the Los Angeles/Long Beach area which grew on one another.

Truckers made \$150 per load at the port and made three trips a day, Brown said. When the influx of containers overwhelmed the system, trucks would back up at the choke points. With most of the day spent idling in their trucks, drivers could only make one trip a day.

Truckers could not make enough trips a day to make a living, so they took other jobs, Brown continued. That led to a shortage of truck drivers. Without the drivers, unloading container ships slowed and the ships backed up in the harbor.

Choke-point issues are being successfully addressed, said Richard A. Nordahl, chief of the Office of Goods Movement in California’s Department of Transportation (Caltrans) and SCOWT’s vice chairman.

“Severe congestion at the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach during the summer and fall of 2004 became so significant that it caught the attention of the state administration, including Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger,” Nordahl said in his report to the convention.

Nordahl said idling trucks, congestion and other issues raised the public ire enough that “political pressure for legislative and legal action became compelling.”

“(The) administration became convinced that unless action was taken to address both the state’s goods movement issues—congestion and environmental—the economy of the state and its role in the global economy could be threatened,” he added.

Short-Term Concerns

In addition to long-term issues, there are short-term concerns as well. The Webber Falls barge collision, which knocked out a section of an I-40 bridge, created freight back-ups that were felt nationwide. Freight shippers had to reroute their goods to other areas which already were operating close to their limits.

California produce destined for the Carolinas was diverted from I-40 to I-20, increasing traffic through Dallas by 15 percent, explained Bruce Lambert, a senior economist with the Corps of Engineers and former federal highway administrator.

Fearing accidents and the resulting traffic pile-ups, Lambert said he always packs a nice supply of music in his car.

Lambert pointed to waterways as a partial solution to easing freight congestion. But even the underutilized waterways are faced with problems.

“On the 25,000 miles of navigable inland waterways, 2.4 billion tons of cargo are moved,” Lambert said. “On those waterways, half of the locks exceed their 50-year design life and lock maintenance downtime has doubled.”

He added that when a 100-car train goes through a small town, it “cuts the town in half.”

“Who speaks for freight?” he asked, rhetorically, adding America needs “safe, reliable, low-cost, redundant transportation with excess capacity that is environmentally friendly.”

“How do we get that, when the greatest distance in the world is from a man’s head to his wallet?” he asked.

There are inexpensive quick fixes to ease some of the problems, he said. Highway signs lead drivers through cities to airports, and signs can be added to guide truckers to port terminals and rail heads.

He cited one example where traffic engineers moved a sign that was blocked from truck drivers’ view by a bridge, to a more visible location. Truck traffic was reduced dramatically at that location with a simple quick fix.

Multimodal Funding

While most state department of transportation funds are earmarked for highway construction, the focus is starting to be broadened to include other means of transportation with a goal of getting some of the containers off the congested roadways.

Dr. Kam Movassaghi, former director of the Louisiana Department of Transportation, rolled out the Institute for Trade and Transportation (ITTS) study of transportation needs, which incorporates an across-the-board review of transportation needs.

Originally geared toward trade with Latin America, the study now is reviewing other sources of trade, including Asian. It will reflect the interrelationship of various modes of transportation and how underutilizing one mode will increase the burden on another.

In addition to state DOT officials, representatives from MarAd and the Corps of Engineers attended. MarAd provided a contract to HIP to administer the conference and foster cooperation between itself, state DOTs and industry, said Deirdre McGowan, IRPT executive director.

Brown concluded by saying that a state can spend \$800,000 a mile to build a cars-only highway that will be maintenance-free for 50 years. Put trucks on the road, he said, the price jumps to \$10 million a mile. Within 10 years, the pounding of trucks on the road will require roadway maintenance.

Most departments of transportation spend about 90 percent of their funds on highways. It's time to take a comprehensive look at how best to spend the limited transportation dollars, he said, looking to a more coordinated effort with rail and waterborne transportation.

— Courtesy of *The Waterways Journal*
(June 6, 2005)

Portals Editorial Note: Capt. Eberhardt is a tug captain and a freelance writer for *The Waterways Journal*.