

Barge shipment in Omaha marks new era of commercial navigation on the Missouri River

By Jamie Danesi

A new era of commercial navigation began on the upper Missouri River June 29 when a commercial barge trafficker headed upriver from Kansas City, Missouri, to Omaha on the first leg of what will be a recurring trip between the two cities.

“There were six barges on this freight load which constitutes to roughly 1,500 tons per barge; it’s a lot of weight,” said Project Specialist Charles Leinen with the Missouri River Project Office, Omaha District, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.



Barges carrying approximately 9,000 tons of freight makes the first leg of their biweekly round trip from Kansas City, Missouri, to Omaha on June 29. This is the first recurring commercial barge traffic in the area in almost a decade. Photo by Capt. Ryan Hignight.

The Missouri River has been used for commercial navigation since the steamboat era in the 1800s, according to the Port of Kansas City’s web site, PortKC.com. Over the years, Congress has passed various laws to ensure the river’s availability for navigation and has tasked the Corps with maintaining the river.

Ted Streckfuss, deputy district engineer with Omaha District, says that there have been “...seven separate legislative actions that go actually way back over 100 years ago to 1912. Part of the Rivers and Harbors Act culminated in 1944-1945 where...the federal government requested and required the Corps of Engineers provide a navigable channel from Sioux City, Iowa, to the mouth of the Missouri - a little over 730 miles – nine feet deep, 300 feet wide from that location...so pretty significant undertaking culminated in the 1980 timeframe with the finalization of the construction efforts.”

In the early 20th century, commercial navigation increased over the years hitting its peak in 1977 at 3.5 million tons of freight before starting to decrease according to Marissa Cleaver Wamble, Port of Kansas City’s vice president of corporate communication. By 2003, Missouri River commercial traffic had dropped to only 600,000 tons. In 2007, the Port of Kansas City’s lease was not renewed because of the decline.

Several factors contributed to the decline including droughts and floods which affected the river’s ability to support navigation. Also, changes to freight railroad regulation were another factor influencing river traffic; according to the Association of American Railroads, the Staggers Rail Act of 1980 led to dramatic drops in rail shipping costs and train accident rates that have made railroads attractive alternatives to barges.

Despite this, the Corps continued its mission to maintain the navigation channel. Eventually, barge traffic started to increase in the 2000's; the Port of Kansas City signed a new lease in 2012, and in 2015 the port received its first barge load of freight since 2007. Leinen said the shipment from Kansas City to Omaha in June is the first regular load in the area.

"We've had intermediate loads with equipment that go up to Sioux City or Omaha, but this one is a frequent load which will be coming up every two weeks," he said.

In addition to being a cost-effective way to transport freight, barges are also friendlier to the environment. Leinen said that one barge can carry as much dry cargo as 16 rail cars or 70 trucks, and as much liquid cargo as 46 rail cars or 144 trucks. Barges can travel farther on one gallon of fuel than trains and trucks (616 miles vs. 478 miles for rail or 150 miles for trucks) and have a smaller carbon footprint than rail and trucks

The Corps hopes this bi-weekly shipment will be the start of an upward trend in commercial traffic on the Missouri River.

"It's heartening from a business perspective to see that businesses using the system that the federal government determined would be appropriate in terms of an avenue to transport trade goods. It's interesting for me to be able to see as recently as these past couple of days we've seen an increase or some barge transport on the Missouri River applying the trade and using the Missouri River as a conveyance strategy," Streckfuss said.