

Durbin: Lock and dam upgrades a 'game changer' for Illinois farmers

By **TIMOTHY EGGERT**
FarmWeek

If farming is a school of patience, then securing federal funding for the agriculture industry is, too.

Just ask U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, who joined other Illinois legislators in finally harvesting their own 15-year infrastructure crop, yielding \$829 million from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to upgrade a pair of locks and dams on the upper Mississippi River.

"It's about time," Durbin said this past month from inside the lockhouse at the Peoria Lock and Dam on the Illinois River. "Today, it's the river. Tomorrow it's the highways. The day after, it's the bridges. You're going to hear a lot more about this."

In total, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will spend more than \$1.3 billion starting in fiscal year 2022 to upgrade inland waterway systems across Illinois.

A majority of those funds — \$732 million — will be used to build a new 1,200-foot lock chamber just north of the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, while \$97.1 million will cover a new fish passage at Lock and Dam 22.

Another \$50 million in various repairs will be split by Locks and Dams 11, 13, 14, 15, 17, 20 and 21, according to Corps plans.

Facilities along the Illinois River will also undergo \$83 million in improvements, including repairs to the Dresden, LaGrange, Lockport, Marseilles, Peoria and Starved Rock locks and dams.

"The monumental infrastructure package that we passed on to the Biden administration is what is making this happen," U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-East Moline, said during the January news conference. "You have to go back to the Eisenhower administration to see this kind of investment."



U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Springfield, and U.S. Rep. Cheri Bustos, D-East Moline, detail \$829 million in funding to upgrade a pair of locks and dams on the Upper Mississippi River during a January news conference from inside the lockhouse at the Peoria Lock and Dam on the Illinois River. (Photo by Timothy Eggert of FarmWeek)

The work to land the funding for upgrades to Illinois' water infrastructure, however, started nearly two decades ago.

"We decided as a delegation to fight for, see if we could bring money in for locks and dams in the state of Illinois and in the Midwest," Durbin said. "And we frankly weren't getting anywhere."

The hang-up, Durbin said, was that cost-benefit ratio calculations to invest in locks and dams weren't appetizing enough — more tax dollars would be spent than economic advantages gained.

So, Durbin and Bustos tied infrastructure investments with ecosystem restora-

tions through the Navigation Ecosystem Sustainability Program — and it worked.

"Spending less than a billion dollars on these locks and dams on the rivers, we're going to get a payback of \$72 billion," Durbin said. "How about that for cost benefit?"

Illinois farmers will especially experience those benefits, Durbin and Bustos said. Larger locks mean barges carrying corn and soybeans can move up and down the river faster, getting products to market more quickly and reducing transportation costs, they said.

"We've had record yields in corn

and soybeans, so we've got to make sure that we have efficient ways to get these to market," Bustos said, noting how a modern 15-barge tow transports the equivalent of 950 bushels of corn.

When a barge approaches the current 600-foot chamber at Lock and Dam 25, it must decouple, a process that takes two to three hours. With the 1,200-foot chamber, a barge can pass in 30 to 45 minutes.

"The economic impact is a game changer for our farmers, (who are) more competitive now in the world than they've ever had to be," Durbin said. "They're going to get a boost and an opportunity in that regard."

Investments in the Upper Mississippi River locks and dams are also expected to generate thousands of new jobs and spread other economic benefits across the region.

The project, which is funded to completion, is expected to take five to six years.

Asked by FarmWeek if it will take another 15 years to receive funding for other lock and dam improvements along the Mississippi and Illinois rivers, Durbin said it's both a matter of "matching up the need, which is obvious, with the resources" and marrying economic and environmental goals.

"These barges and what they move, the alternative is a lot of trucks burning a lot of diesel fuel," Durbin said. "And we have a much more efficient way to do it from an environmental viewpoint. When we put that combination together and sold the (Corps) on the project ... we started a long process. So, as fast as we can appropriate the money and they can get the work done, we're going to be moving forward with many more projects in the future."

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