

Northwest ports seek federal funding for maintenance

Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association, says the maintenance helps keep U.S. exports competitive overseas.

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A cargo vessel calls at the Port of Astoria, Ore. Representatives of several Oregon port districts met with members of Congress last week seeking funds to maintain channels and jetties.

Representatives of several Northwest ports asked members of Congress last week to continue funding for maintaining waterways used to transport goods in and out of the region.

Members of the Grays Harbor, Bandon and Coos Bay port districts and the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association participated April 20 in a roundtable hosted by Rep. Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., in Coos Bay, Ore. DeFazio is ranking member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

The port representatives said continued funding in the next Water Resources Development Act is necessary to ensure navigation channels are dredged and jetties maintained.

A congressional user fee for coastal ports and harbors, the harbor maintenance tax, is designed to provide 100 percent of operations and maintenance costs to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers for deep draft and coastal waterways. But since 2003, according to the association, tax collections have far exceeded funds appropriated for harbor maintenance. The surplus of collections over expenditures has grown to more than \$9 billion.

“Rather than being used for their intended purpose, harbor maintenance tax revenues have been used to help balance the federal budget,” according to the association.

“That’s a problem when you have deteriorating jetties and navigation channels not being maintained to their depth and width that we need to move cargo,” Kristin Meira, executive director of the waterways association, told the Capital Press.

Members of Congress at the roundtable had a positive response to the presentations, Meira said.

“This is the difference between U.S. cargo being able to be moved efficiently to our ports, loaded on vessels that are able to load fully and make it out overseas,” she said. “It’s the part of cargo transport that folks just don’t think about when they think about whether or not U.S.-grown and manufactured products are competitive in overseas markets.”

Northwest industry representatives hope for a return to a two-year cycle for renewing the Water Resources Development Act, Meira said.

Meira hopes the House and Senate will introduce versions of the bill by the summer. The House and Senate would reconcile the two versions into one bill to be signed by President Donald Trump.

“We think it looks really good,” Meira said. “This is a bill that typically gets a lot of support because no matter where you are in the United States, chances are you’re pretty close to a Corps of Engineers project. Most members of Congress see the value in what the agency does.”