

Howard Marklein: The Mississippi River: Our original commercial highway

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On Thursday, October 5, 2023, I was honored to be a part of the Northern Grain Belt Ports Annual Meeting in La Crosse. We gathered to celebrate that the southwest coast of Wisconsin is now a federally recognized Port Statistical Area. This means that federal funding, talent and resources will be used to develop the Mississippi River along our western coast to grow our commercial ports which already move more than 175 million tons of freight each year.

As a member of the Wisconsin Mississippi River Parkway Commission (WMRPC), I know that we have a lot of visitors driving the Great River Road this time of year to view the beautiful fall colors, stop at roadside stands and enjoy the sights, sounds, smells and tastes of autumn. Without a doubt, the Mississippi River is a major tourist attraction. We see tour boats, fishermen, bird watchers and others throughout the year. We welcome visitors in many different ways.

But our river is much, much more than a tourist destination. We must also celebrate it as a commercial highway.

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As I travel around my district, the issue I hear about most is roads, roads, roads. The people I represent want better roads and the businesses I represent need efficient routes to move goods to market. The Mississippi River is a different kind of "road" - perhaps the original "road". The Mississippi River is truly a commercial

highway. The new Northern Grain Belt Ports distinction recognizes a new opportunity for our state to capitalize on one of our most unique resources.

Throughout history, the Mississippi River has carried all kinds of goods and people. More than 500 million tons of goods are shipped on this commercial highway! 78% of the world's feed grains and soybeans travel on this waterway.

The 17th Senate District is the most ag-dependent Senate District in our state. In the eight counties I represent, we grow and produce everything from dairy cows to cranberries to hogs to crops. Speaking of crops, a significant amount of the grain in my district will be loaded on barges for a journey down the Mississippi and on to markets around the world.

With 60% of all grain exported in the US moving on the Mississippi, the Northern Grain Belt Ports distinction and the investments that follow will significantly improve opportunities for grain transportation for our communities.

The investments that follow will also be used to improve the shoreline and waterway, as well as surrounding roads, rail and transportation infrastructure. We will see major improvements in our abilities to move all kinds of goods to market.

Over the last several years, the State of Wisconsin has made significant investments in Agricultural Exports. In the most recent state budget, we allocated an additional \$2 million to this effort.

In 2022, Wisconsin exported \$4.22 billion in ag and food products to 142 countries. This is an increase of 7% or nearly \$280 million in value compared to 2021. Our goal is to increase the export of dairy, meat, crops and other agricultural products by 25% by June 2026. We are well on our way. The funding and program changes we made will allow Wisconsin to join new trade shows or develop all-new foreign buyer missions for Wisconsin. Financial support and export education will be realized in the Export Expansion Grant, designed to support collaborative industry projects.

These are smart, practical strategies to boost Wisconsin's agricultural exports. We are working hard to promote our rich agricultural portfolio to buyers around the world. We are providing assistance to agricultural businesses in Wisconsin to innovate, learn about export strategies, make connections and move their goods to a wider market. This port distinction will compliment these efforts.

In addition to providing opportunity for existing businesses, this distinction will also grow Wisconsin's ability to provide multi-modal shipping options beyond agriculture. The financial support created by this distinction will impact distribution options for manufacturing, construction and retail as well as agriculture. The Northern Grain Belt Ports currently moves more than 175 million tons of freight each year. The investments made in this area will grow our abilities and opportunities to capitalize on our unique commercial highway.

I am encouraged and optimistic about the opportunities ahead of us on the Mississippi River. This river has played a role in commerce throughout history and I believe we are on the precipice of an exciting new era.

-Marklein, R-Spring Green, is co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee and represents the 17th Senate District.