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# A win for waterways across the country: An editorial

##### Published: Friday, April 20, 2012, 8:26 AM

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Keeping ports and waterways navigable is vital for our nation's economy, and that's why Congress needs to ensure that money collected for the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund is actually used to dredge and maintain the country's arteries of commerce.

Legislation aimed at doing just that advanced this week. The House adopted a transportation bill that included what's known as the RAMP Act, an acronym for Realize America's Maritime Promise. Louisiana Rep. Charles Boustany, who has been pushing the measure for more than a year, succeeded in getting it added as an amendment to the House transportation bill.

That's encouraging for Louisiana. This state has had to beseech Congress -- as recently as last year -- for enough money to keep the lower Mississippi River adequately dredged when a tighter Army Corps of Engineer dredging budget and high river levels were threatening to disrupt shipping.

The measure is also important to the nation as a whole. While the Mississippi River is a major artery for national commerce, it's not the only waterway that's experienced a shortage of money for dredging. The nation's 59 busiest ports are at federally designated depths and widths less than 35 percent of the time, according to a 2010 report issued by the Congressional Research Service.

Given how crucial navigation is, it's hard to fathom why this money -- $1.3 billion to $1.6 billion annually -- isn't being used for its intended purpose. Instead, only about half of it is spent on such work. Congress has traditionally used the rest to offset general spending.

"It is a blatant misuse of taxpayer funds to divert money from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund to projects other than dredging and maintenance,'' Rep. Boustany said. "Our waterways are critical economic pathways for our nation's commerce and ability to move American goods to the marketplace.''

Indeed, a report on the Mississippi that came out early this year, commissioned by a group of maritime businesses, makes it clear that the U.S. economy would take a huge hit if decreased dredging forced reductions in shipping. According to the study, silting-in of the lower Mississippi River could cause the national economy to lose more than $9.2 billion worth of cargo.

Inadequate spending on ports and waterways also would hamper the nation's ability to take advantage of the widening of the Panama Canal, slated for completion in 2014.

The House transportation bill now heads to conference committee, and it's crucial that the final version include both the Restore Act, which calls for 80 percent of Clean Water Act fines from the BP spill to go to Gulf Coast states, and the RAMP Act. Sen. Mary Landrieu said that she'll push for Rep. Boustany's measure to be part of the final bill, and that's encouraging.

Louisiana has a lot at stake in the transportation bill, for the health of its coast and its economy. Both are also important to the nation as a whole.