



River Traffic Resumes, Bridge Traffic Still on Hold

By Blake Fontenay

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The Mississippi River reopened to boat traffic in Memphis Friday morning, May 14, following a tense few days that threatened to severely damage the world economy.

River traffic had been halted since Tuesday, May 11, after a routine inspection uncovered damage to the Hernando DeSoto Bridge. Transportation officials were concerned that the bridge could collapse, endangering ships passing below.

On Friday, transportation officials from Tennessee and Arkansas made the determination that the risk of a bridge collapse was sufficiently low enough to allow river traffic to resume.

While boats are once again plying the river, the bridge remains closed to car and truck traffic while officials from the Tennessee Department of Transportation work out a plan for the needed repair work on a supporting truss.

Resuming marine operations on the river was critical not just for Memphis, but the rest of the world as well.

The United States provides more than 60 percent of the world's grain supply, most of which is transported from farms in the Midwest down the Mississippi River to New Orleans, where it is loaded onto tankers and shipped to international markets.

The river is also used to transport many other raw materials and supplies used both domestically and internationally.

Deb Calhoun, senior vice president of the Washington, D.C.-based Waterways Council, Inc., said a prolonged shutdown of the river could have been disastrous.

“We dodged a bullet,” Calhoun said. “A crisis was averted in the nick of time.”

That doesn’t mean the Tuesday-Friday shutdown was without consequences.

To use just one example, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the brief closure caused a drop in grain futures that cost farmers \$7.5 billion.

Calhoun said the potential impact to other sectors of the economy could have been equally damaging. The river is used to transport some of the oil and gas needed to relieve shortages caused by the recent Colonial Pipeline outage.

Lengthy delays in river traffic could also have further increased the price of construction materials, which have already gone up significantly because of other issues with business supply chains.

The Institute of Water Resources, which is part of the U.S. Corps of Engineers, estimates that 430,000 tons of cargo move through Memphis on the Mississippi in a typical day.

In a week’s time, that translates into more than 1.3 million in agricultural exports, almost 400,000 tons of construction materials, almost 400,000 tons of chemicals, almost 300,000 tons of petroleum products, more than 250,000 tons of ores and metals, more than 220,000 tons of coal, and more than 85,000 tons of other products.

During the closure, lines of boats towing barges formed on either side of the bridge, with more undoubtedly stuck in holding patterns on other portions of the river. Prior to reopening the river to boat traffic around 9 a.m. Friday, the U.S. Coast Guard reported that there were 62 boats and 1,058 barges waiting to pass under the bridge.

TDOT officials haven’t yet given an estimate on when traffic on the bridge might resume, leaving many travelers with the choice of either enduring delays in crossing the Interstate 55 bridge across the river, or else detouring to other bridges located miles north or south of Memphis.

The transportation agency issued a news release in which it outlined several steps it is taking to address the situation.

“The design team is investigating the benefits of installing a steel plate to beef up the fractured section and thus increase our factor of safety for the existing configuration,” TDOT said in its release. “The design team is working on an interim repair design concept that contemplates using steel rods that would be attached to the bridge and span over the fractured section, and provide the needed strength to reopen the bridge to vehicular traffic.”

TDOT didn’t provide a timetable on when repairs might begin or when vehicular traffic across the bridge might resume.

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Tennessee Department of Transportation

Meanwhile, the issues with the bridge have sparked discussions about whether federal funding from President Joe Biden’s proposed infrastructure plan should be spent on repairs.

Locally, the bridge closure has also stirred up more discussion about a proposal to build a third bridge for vehicles to cross the Mississippi somewhere in the Memphis area.