

Waterman

Tracy Zea, Waterways Council Inc.

By David Krapf, Editor in Chief

Tracy R. Zea was named president and CEO of the Waterways Council Inc., which advocates for modern and well-financed inland waterways on behalf of river carriers, ports and shippers, on July 8, 2020. He had been the WCI's vice president of government relations since 2015, and prior to that served as an aide to the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, which oversees federal waterways policy. Zea discusses dealing with the pandemic, a new administration, a new Congress and other issues since he became WCI's head.



WCI photo

WorkBoat: *It's been a year since you became WCI's chief. Describe how your first year, dominated by Covid-19, went? How tough was it?*

Tracy Zea: WCI is in a great place, especially after the curve balls that Covid provided in 2020. We're lucky to have an experienced team in place that was able to accomplish significant wins during my first year. In 2021 WCI gained a new director of government relations, Dustin Davidson, to backfill my previous position. Like every association in D.C., Covid forced WCI into adapting and producing new innovative ways to lobby Capitol Hill, and we continue to look for new opportunities to provide value to the membership of WCI.

WB: *How has the pandemic affected WCI and the inland waterways industry? Did you have to tweak policies and procedures?*

Zea: The pandemic forced WCI to turn our in-person meetings into virtual meetings and conferences. Putting on a virtual fly-in to lobby Capitol Hill presented logistical and technological challenges that you do not have at an in-person event. Taking the 'glass is half-full' approach, the virtual aspect of the fly-in also allowed the opportunity for more members of Congress to participate in meetings, maximizing WCI's outreach in both the House and Senate. The inland waterways industry continued to show its versatility during the pandemic by adapting to different protocols and safety measures while keeping commerce flowing.

WB: *How has working with the new Congress and the new Biden administration been? Are they being "friendly" to the inland waterways industry?*

Zea: Inland waterways infrastructure is one of the few things in Washington, D.C., that continues to be a bipartisan issue, and it shows in all the different infrastructure plans that have been released. The Biden administration was the first to release an infrastructure package and it included inland waterways, and each of the Congressional packages released since then have also included inland waterways funding. This significant achievement proves the outreach from WCI's diverse membership and the strong grassroots advocacy of our members does make a difference.

WB: *What do you think of Biden's budget providing \$6.8 billion for the Corps Civil Works Program, the highest annual budget ever requested for Civil Works but below the \$7.8 billion enacted for the current fiscal year?*

Zea: I believe the increase in the budget highlights the importance of the work that the Corps provides to the nation, and the need to continue constructing and modernizing the nation's inland waterways infrastructure. The budget release is a positive step forward, but there are still areas that WCI needs to work with Congress to ensure that the inland waterways receive adequate funding.

WB: *What do you think of the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2020 which was signed into law in December? Any specific change stand out, besides the change in the Inland Waterways Trust Fund from a 50/50 split to 65 federal and 35 from the industry-supported Trust Fund? What were the positives and negatives from WRDA 2020?*

Zea: WRDA 2020 provided a historic win for the inland waterways industry. The cost-share shift will provide signifi-

cant value to the nation and users of the inland waterways. The WRDA bill also included a needed 902 cost-limit increase for the Kentucky Lock and a Chief's Report authorization for the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway – Brazos River Floodgates and Colorado locks. The cost-limit increase allows work on the Kentucky Lock to continue to completion. The Chief's Report also allows construction of new sector gates and channel widening to provide for safer and more efficient navigation and helps with water and sediment management capabilities on the Brazos River.

WB: *More funding for operations and maintenance (O&M) on the inland navigation system has been pushed for decades. This has improved somewhat in recent years. Do you think O&M funding was adequate in the recent WRDA and what needs attention now?*



The Kentucky Lock Addition Project, Paducah, Ky., includes design and construction of a new 110'x 1,200' lock to be located landward of the existing 110'x 600' lock.

Zea: Operations and maintenance funding is provided through the Energy and Water Development, and Related Agencies appropriations bill. WCI believes in the motto that a rising tide lifts

all boats, and I believe the increase in O&M of the system is due to the overall increase of the Corps of Engineers Civil Works funding. As the waterways system ages, it is critically important that



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WB: *The barge industry was hit hard in the early months of the pandemic but is now starting to see some improvement. What is your outlook for the inland waterways for the rest of the year and beyond?*

Zea: I am optimistic about the outlook for the inland waterways. If you look at the monthly trust fund receipts into the Treasury, the eight-month total is more than \$11 million higher than the comparable total that Treasury reported last year for fiscal year 2020. The recent events of the Colonial Pipeline and the Memphis Bridge crack highlight the inland waterways' critical role in the supply chain. Barge transportation continues to be the most environmentally friendly and safest mode of surface transportation. USDA is expecting a record crop this year which should equate to more grain being exported via the river.

WB: *At press time, passage of a \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill appeared to be near and the inland waterways is part of the final plan. Biden's initial plan called for \$17 billion for inland waterways, coastal ports, land ports of entry and ferries. What are your thoughts about what this could mean for the inland waterways?*

Zea: The first half of 2021 has really highlighted the need to modernize America's infrastructure. We saw the Suez Canal shut down from just one ship getting stuck in the channel. At home we saw the cyberattack on the Colonial Pipeline and the shutdown of the Memphis bridge with the discovery of a crack. The administration and Congress have an opportunity to provide significant and meaningful investment in not only the inland waterways but the rest of America's infrastructure. We were encouraged by the administration's infrastructure proposal, particularly in light of the fact that the last package passed by Congress in 2009 did not include the inland waterways or the Corps of Engineers.

WB



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Zea is optimistic that the inland waterways will have a strong rest of the year and beyond.