

Paralysis on America's Rivers: There's Too Much Water

By Mitch Smith

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VAN BUREN, Ark. — Marty Shell just wanted the lights back on.

Nineteen barges bound for nowhere were tied up along the swollen riverbank. Dark warehouses full of flooded fertilizer reeked with a sulfuric stench that made it painful to inhale. The river system, which for decades provided Mr. Shell a livelihood, now spread only gelatinous mud and pungent debris and uncomfortable questions about the future.

The devastating flooding that has submerged large parts of the Midwest and South this spring has also brought barge traffic on many of the regions' rivers to a near standstill. The water is too high and too fast to navigate. Shipments of grains, fertilizers and construction supplies are stranded. And riverfront ports, including the ones Mr. Shell oversees in Van Buren and Fort Smith, Ark., have been overtaken by the floods and severely damaged.

As Mr. Shell surveyed the wreckage last week, anything approaching normalcy remained months, or even a year, away. To start, he would be happy just to get the power restored.

“Before this happened, my mind-set was, ‘What am I doing in the next month or two?’ — trying to stay ahead,” said Mr. Shell, the president of Five Rivers Distribution, which sends products up and down rivers on barges. “Nowadays, I wake up with, ‘What am I going to do for today?’”



Marty Shell, president of Five Rivers Distribution, talks to Wesley Daniel, a terminal manager, in a flood-damaged warehouse at a port the company manages. Joseph Rushmore for The New York Times

Across the country's flood-battered midsection, the farms, towns and homes consumed by the bloated waters have drawn much of the attention. But flooding has had another, less intuitive effect — crippling the nation's essential river commerce. Water, the very thing that makes barge shipping possible in normal times, has been present in such alarming overabundance this spring that it has rendered river transportation impossible in much of the United States.

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The Arkansas River has been closed to commercial traffic. So has the Illinois River, a key connection to Chicago and the Great Lakes. And so has part of the Mississippi River near St. Louis, where it crested on Sunday at its second-highest point on record, cutting off the river's northern section from shippers to the south.

As a result, farmers already grappling with flooded fields and worries about the trade war with China have struggled to obtain fertilizer for their crops. Customers have seen their deliveries of construction materials and road salt get stuck midway to their destinations. And shippers have made drastic cuts to their operations with work at a standstill.

“It’s like when you’re driving on an interstate and there’s an accident in front of you and there’s nowhere to go,” said Jeff Webb, president of Cargill Marine and Terminal, which operates more than 1,400 barges, hundreds of which are now stuck in the Gulf of Mexico or lower Mississippi River because of closures to the north.

Barges are slower and less conspicuous than trains, planes and trucks, but they can be a much more economical way to move bulk goods, as they have done around this country for generations. One barge can haul as much as 70 semi-trucks’ worth of dry cargo. They are especially useful for farmers, who use them to send harvested grain to export markets and to receive fertilizer for their next crop. A majority of the country’s exported grain is shipped on the Mississippi and its tributaries.

“We’re feeding the world, basically,” said Deidre Smith, director of the Arkansas Waterways Commission, a state agency. “It’s going to impact that a lot. The farmers right now are going to be hurting.”

The breakdown in river transportation is just one more burden for farmers, who are also facing low commodity prices. Some held on to last year’s crop, hoping that tariff-depressed prices would bounce back this year; now they cannot even get their produce to market.

Outside Conway, Ark., Chris Schaefer’s corn sprouted last month and grew past his knees. It is all gone now, dead beneath several feet of swift-moving, latte-colored river water. A few days ago, Mr. Schaefer drove a motorboat through one of his hay barns.

Chris Schaefers, left, and his neighbor and fellow farmer, Jill Edwards, passed an irrigation system nearly covered by flood water in a swamped Arkansas crop field.

Joseph Rushmore for The New York Times

Facing the possibility of thousands of swamped acres with nothing planted, Mr. Schaefers said he would like to sell what he has left from last year's rice and soybean harvest, but it is stuck in grain bins. The same river that killed this year's crop is so swollen that barges cannot take last year's to market.

Even farmers whose fields have remained dry have faced troubles. The halts in river traffic have been a constant headache this planting season for Mike Christenson, agronomy division manager at Countryside Cooperative, a grain elevator and storage facility in Wisconsin. When the barges that haul imported fertilizer up the Mississippi could not get through, Mr. Christenson scrambled for alternatives.

"It's been ugly all spring," said Mr. Christenson, who said that for the first time in a decade, he was going to the extra expense of getting fertilizer shipments delivered by truck and rail.

"It's just going to cost more to put in the crop than normal," said Travis Justice, the Arkansas Farm Bureau's chief economist.

An idled barge in Van Buren, Ark. It may be weeks before the flooded Arkansas River is back within its banks and running slowly and predictably enough for barges to navigate it safely.
Joseph Rushmore for The New York Times

Even if the rivers reopen to barges in the next few weeks — and that is uncertain, with water levels still near record levels in some places — the effects on the economy could linger. Never has so much of the river system been closed for so long at such an important time of year.

“We thought it was as bad as it was going to get” weeks ago, said Debra Calhoun, a senior vice president at the Waterways Council, an industry group. “The forecast just continues to be horrid.”

With supply chains disrupted, warehouses overflowing and shippers turning to more expensive ways to move goods, consumers could see higher prices and shortages of some products in the summer and fall.

“I think most people take the river for granted — they just assume that the grain is going to get to market, the steel coils are going to show up to make the pipe, and peanuts are going to get here,” said Bryan Day, the executive director of the Little Rock Port Authority in Arkansas, where dozens of barges have been waiting in the harbor for the water to subside and the river to reopen.

Bryan Day, executive director of the Little Rock Port Authority, worked with barge captains to store their loaded barges in the port's slack-water harbor to await safer river conditions. Houston Cofield for The New York Times

Barges need water to operate, but not this much of it. Shippers depend on predictable channels and a steady pace of river flow. The huge amounts of water that have rushed through the system in recent months have sent rivers bursting from their banks and made them hazardous for travel.

As the climate changes, scientists warn that the Midwest and South will experience more periods of intense rain, which can contribute to floods. May was the second-wettest month on record in the 48 contiguous states, federal officials said.

The risks of overwhelmed rivers have already been seen. Two barges broke loose in Oklahoma last month and careened down the flooded Arkansas River, raising fears that they would smash into a dam and cause it to fail, with devastating consequences downstream. The barges did eventually strike a dam, but it was only slightly damaged. A few days earlier in St. Louis, water levels were so high that a towboat struck a bridge.

In Arkansas, Mr. Shell has been spending his days waiting for the water to finish receding at the ports he runs. Instead of loading barges and trucks, his employees have been cleaning off the mud, surveying the damage and hoping for federal help to rebuild. It could still be weeks before barges are moving on the rivers, and his company's losses have already reached into the hundreds of thousands of dollars.

But on a recent morning, as Mr. Shell idled his pickup truck in a cavernous warehouse still caked with river mud, there was one sign of a fresh start: The overhead lights came back on.

Patricia Cohen contributed reporting from Eau Claire, Wis.

