

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 12, 2024

The Honorable Michael Connor
Assistant Secretary of the Army
(Civil Works)
Department of the Army
108 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310-0108

Lieutenant General William H. Graham
Commanding General and Chief of
Engineers
U.S Army Corps of Engineers
441 G Street NW
Washington, DC 20314

Dear Assistant Secretary Connor and Lieutenant General Graham:

This year, Alabama experienced major failures at Demopolis Lock, Holt Lock, and Wilson Lock, each causing extended outages, impacting the many businesses directly dependent on our inland waterway system, as well as numerous others throughout the supply chain.

The Black Warrior River is a "high use" waterway, while the Tennessee-Tombigbee River is considered "medium use," also serving as an alternative route to the Gulf if the Mississippi River experiences any disruptions. On January 16, 2024, the Demopolis Lock, situated at the junction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee and Black Warrior Rivers in Demopolis, Alabama, failed due to the collapse of a large piece of concrete from the upstream gate sill. Fortunately, following an intense period of repair work led by the Mobile District, the Lock reopened, and barge traffic resumed in May. Shortly thereafter, severe risks from a deteriorating monolith were identified at the Holt Lock on the Black Warrior River near Tuscaloosa, Alabama, leading to its closure on June 22, 2024. While Holt Lock reopened on October 2, 2024, 102 days after cracks caused the unscheduled shutdown, as of the date of this letter, operations at Holt Lock remain severely limited, continuing to stymie the efficient movement of barge traffic on the upper third portion of the Black Warrior River.

These two lock failures have directly and significantly reduced the annual tonnage moving along these river systems. For example, the Coffeerville Lock, immediately down river from Demopolis, reported¹ 938.54 kilotons in December 2023. In February 2024, immediately following the failure of Demopolis, Coffeerville reported only 46.2 kilotons. The same can be said regarding the closure at Holt. The Oliver Lock, immediately down river from Holt, reported 292.7 kilotons in May 2024. In July 2024, immediately following the closure of the Holt Lock, Oliver reported only 85.7 kilotons. The impact is self-evident.

¹ US Army Corps of Engineers Lock Performance Monitoring System
(<https://ndc.ops.usace.army.mil/ords/f?p=108:1>)

These two recent lock failures highlight the urgent need for increased Operations and Maintenance (O&M) funding to meet the modernization and rehabilitation demands in this system, as well as to keep pace with rising usage. However, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers sets O&M budget guidance based on a five-year tonnage average for river systems. We are deeply concerned that the significantly reduced annual tonnage on the Tennessee-Tombigbee and Black Warrior River Systems in calendar year 2024 due to the closures of the Demopolis and Holt Locks will cause the Corps to underinvest critically needed O&M funds in these river systems. As such, we urge the Corps to adjust the budget guidance for the Tennessee-Tombigbee and Black Warrior River systems by excluding the tonnage data from the calendar year 2024. These vital waterways and their associated industries should not face further hardship, beyond the impacts already resulting from the outages, by an inadequate O&M budget allocations in future fiscal years.

We appreciate the Mobile District, South Atlantic Division, and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Headquarters for swiftly redirecting resources to address these severe failures. We look forward to collaborating with you on this important issue.

Sincerely,



Katie Boyd Britt
United States Senator



Tommy Tuberville
United States Senator



Jerry Carl
United States Representative



Barry Moore
United States Representative



Mike Rogers
United States Representative



Robert Aderholt
United States Representative



Dale Strong
United States Representative



Gary Palmer
United States Representative



Terri Sewell
United States Representative