

OKLAHOMA'S PORTS

Oklahoma economy floats on commerce

McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System makes it possible

A sea of giant rolled-steel plates occupy storage yards at the Tulsa Port of Catoosa, waiting to be unrolled, split and fabricated into pipe or other industrial uses.

The massive coils of steel, which weigh thousands of pounds each, arrived at the port on a flotilla of barges, traveling up the Mississippi River and then the Arkansas and Verdigris rivers to reach Catoosa.

Guided by port director David Yarbrough, I recently toured the immaculate 2,500-acre Port of Catoosa industrial park along with colleagues from the Oklahoma Center for the Advancement of Science and Technology (OCAST).

As we rolled past the steel coils, Yarbrough explained how he uses them as an economic indicator.

"I always tell people, 'if you want to see how the economy is doing here in Tulsa, come out to see how much steel is on the ground,'" Yarbrough said. "This is a good inventory of steel. Things are looking good."

Steel is just one of the many commodities traveling up and down the inland waterway along a navigation system that adds \$8.5 billion in annual revenue to the U.S. economy, according to a 2015 Regional Economic Impact Study conducted for the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System.

Wheat, soybeans, fertilizer, steel, iron, heavy manufactured items and bulk liquids such as chemicals, asphalt, refined petroleum products and molasses arrive or leave the Port of Catoosa daily.

The Port of Catoosa sits along a 1.5-mile long channel off the Verdigris River just east of Tulsa. It is the western most port along the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System.

Located 444 miles from the mouth of the Arkansas River, the Port of Catoosa opened in 1971 in a ceremony highlighted by a dedication speech from President Richard M. Nixon.

President Nixon said something profound that we love to quote," Yarbrough said. "Welcome to Oklahoma's Seacoast."

Nixon's words are prominently displayed on the Port of Catoosa website.

Since it opened in 1971, the Inland Waterway has sparked a massive industrial boom that stretches from Catoosa south to Oklahoma's other public port, the Port of Muskogee.

"In the 53 miles between the Port of Muskogee and Port of Catoosa there are 80-some industries that have located and employ about 8,000 people," said Muskogee port director Scott Robinson. "They've invested about \$5 billion. We know the impacts. Most of our major employers here in Muskogee are here because of the waterway."



Construction on the inland waterway system began in 1961 and was completed at a cost of \$1.2 billion (pre-inflation dollars). The historic first barge that reached the Port of Catoosa in 1971 carried 650 tons of newsprint.

A series of 18 locks and dams – including five in Oklahoma – make the Arkansas River system navigable for towboats pushing barges. In addition to Oklahoma's two public ports at Catoosa and Muskogee, there are also six private port terminals in the state.

In 2015, 11.7 million tons of freight was shipped along the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, according to the regional economic impact report. The waterway and the industries located along it in both Arkansas and Oklahoma provided 55,872 jobs and generated \$289 million in taxes.

Last year, 1,360 barges passed through the Catoosa port, hauling 2.5 million tons of commodities.

“One barge can replace 60 eighteen-wheelers,” Yarbrough said. “Water borne shipping is the cheapest alternative. It's cheaper than rail; it's a lot cheaper than truck. As far as ton miles per gallon of fuel, there is nothing more efficient than a towboat pushing a barge.”

A 2015 Inland Waterway fact sheet published by the Oklahoma Department of Transportation says it would take 221,000 trucks or 57,000 rails cars to haul an equivalent amount of commodities that travel annually to Oklahoma ports by water.

Yarbrough describes the two public ports and the waterway as an “economic engine” for Oklahoma that offers the options of water, rail and truck transportation for shippers, along with ample lands on which to locate industrial facilities. The industrial facilities and logistic options provided at the ports directly and indirectly support thousands of jobs in Oklahoma and neighboring states.

Fifty-three river miles to the south of Catoosa, the Port of Muskogee operates along three miles of waterfront near the confluence of the Arkansas, the Grand and the Verdigris rivers. Scott Robinson has been port director since 1990.

“The Port of Muskogee is really a trans-load center with an industrial park attached to it,” Robinson said. “Companies that are in the port or outside the port that use the multi-modal transportation have the option to use the most cost-effective combination of barge, rail or truck transportation.”

The Port of Muskogee maintains 450-acre port operation along the Arkansas River, plus another 1,000 acres of industrial park land. The port and the 14 industries located on its properties employ approximately 2,500 people.

In 2017, 700,000 tons of commodities flowed into and out of the Port of Muskogee. Dal-Tile, one of the world's largest manufacturers of ceramic tile, is the port's largest individual shipper. Commodities such as clay, coke, feldspar, fertilizer and steel are the most frequently shipped into Muskogee.

Oklahoma ports work collaboratively rather than in competition with one another, the two port directors said. A common goal is critical maintenance of the Arkansas River Navigation System.

“We band together to make sure that navigation is reliable,” Robinson said. “We work very closely with the U.S. Corps of Engineers to do that. We go to Washington frequently, lobbying Congress for appropriations to ensure the Corps can maintain the infrastructure and address deferred backlog of maintenance.”

Added Yarbrough: “One of the things that keeps us up at night is worrying about the critical maintenance on our infrastructure. If we have a critical infrastructure failure on a lock and dam, our waterway is out of business for everything upstream from that location.”

Protecting the infrastructure of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System ensures that lifeline for thousands of Oklahoma jobs will remain open and uninterrupted, Robinson said. It is essential to the communities that depend on the waterway.

“If the two public ports weren’t working together, I don’t think our river would be as successful as it has turned out to be,” Robinson said.

[Read the article in the 7-3-18 Oklahoman](#)

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