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By F.A. Krift

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Safe navigation of the region's rivers provides about 200,000 jobs and \$10 billion in wages, according to the Port of Pittsburgh Commission.

Yet the average Western Pennsylvanian probably isn't too concerned with the potentially catastrophic state of the rivers' crumbling locks and dams, says James McCarville, executive director of the commission.

"This is very serious, and it makes you feel like you're Chicken Little out there and saying the sky is falling, but in this case the sky is falling," McCarville said Thursday.

The Army Corps of Engineers did its part in bringing attention to the worn state of the Pittsburgh District locks and dams during a tour of a "dewatered" facility on the Monongahela River near Braddock.

The district stretches from western New York into West Virginia and west to Ohio, and is the inland United States' largest, oldest and most fatigued, said Col. Michael P. Crall, engineer for the Pittsburgh District. And it needs federal money.

Of Western Pennsylvania's 17 locks and dams, 13 were built between 1909 and 1938, McCarville said. Two navigation dams at Emsworth on the Ohio River and Elizabeth on the Monongahela are "critically near failure," Crall said. Three locks and dams received a failing grade in a

Pennsylvania Section of American Society of Civil Engineers report and seven others earned a D.

A project to remove the Elizabeth locks and dam and repair other facilities is at risk since the Inland Waterways Trust Fund -- financed by a federal diesel fuel tax -- is nearly out of money, Crall said. The Army Corps doesn't expect the project, already 12 years behind schedule, to be completed until 2020. It was originally projected for completion in 2004.

"We are in a fix-as-it-fails mode," Crall said.

More than 52 million tons of cargo are shipped through the Port of Pittsburgh. While the majority is coal, the daily cargo includes petroleum products, metal ores, sand, gravel and building materials.

Consol Energy Inc. moves 90,000 barges of coal along the Pittsburgh river system, said James Grech, a senior vice president with the Upper St. Clair-based company. Everyone in the region would feel a major breach of the waterway system, he said.

"In my mind, it's not a question of if we have a catastrophic failure," he said. "It's when we have one."

Reps. John Murtha, D-Johnstown, Tim Murphy, R-Upper St. Clair, and Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, toured the locks and dam and said they are committed to funding repairs.

Last week, the House Appropriations Committee approved \$40.8 million to the Lower Monongahela River navigation project, which includes the Elizabeth project.

"I am absolutely convinced that the economic impact would be catastrophic if one these places went down," Murtha said.

About 45,000 jobs come directly from river system activity, a Port of Pittsburgh impact study found. Another 150,000 jobs are indirectly created through businesses dependent upon the rivers and would be lost in a major failure. McCarville compared the potential economic hit to the fall of the steel industry in Pittsburgh.

"Like all infrastructure projects, if I'm watching a Steelers game, it really doesn't do anything for me," he said. "It's invisible. It's not on the radar screen of anybody. Part of why we got in the situation is because it's the type of thing that, 'Oh, we can put it off for a year.'

"We've put it off for 50 years, and we're running out of time."