

Ingram Barge Company's test containers make dramatic arrival at America's Central Port

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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Ingram Barge Company's test run of containers aboard a barge made its dramatic arrival at America's Central Port in Granite City on Thursday.



Dan Mecklenborg, Senior VP and Chief Legal Officer for Ingram Barge Company, said the single barge loaded with 54 containers represented the introduction of ‘Containerization’ to America’s Central Port in Granite City.

America’s Central Port is the northern-most commercial port on the Mississippi River that doesn’t become ice-bound in the winter and containerization is a system of intermodal freight transport using steel containers built to standardized dimensions.

“That’s the significance of docking this barge loaded with containers at America’s Central Port,” said Mecklenborg said. “This demonstrates the viability of moving containerized freight Mcvia America’s inland waterways.”

He went on to say that on average, one ton of freight can be transported 600 miles on one gallon of diesel fuel. That’s 33 percent better efficiency over rail transport and over 260 percent more efficient than truck.

Mecklenborg said with no retrofitting required, a single open-hulled barge can hold three columns of nine containers stacked three high or 81 containers.

"If you’ve ever seen a tractor-trailer on the highway transporting a container or a railroad car with containers stacked two-high, it’s easy to see benefit of water transport,” he said.

Between America’s Central Port in Granite City, Illinois and the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, a single boat can push a flotilla of 25 barges, each loaded with 81 containers, totaling 2,025 containers. Between the confluence and the Port of New Orleans, the channel and lock system allow for flotillas up to 40 barges/boat totaling 3,240 containers or 5,184,000 tons.

Mecklenborg said, “Currently, America’s inland waterways are 50 percent underutilized” and pointed out that increasing utilization of America’s inland waterways up to or close to 100 percent would not require improvement of existing river infrastructure.

Transporting containerized products by barge is ideally suited for agriculture, wood /timber, and construction material. Ingram Barge Company, headquartered in Nashville, Kentucky, is the leading carrier on America’s inland waterways with over 150 boats and 5,000 barges.



Grafton Mayor Tom Thompson played a significant role in Thursday’s presentation, showing his support of intermodal transportation.

Thompson said that Grafton was involved as a member of the Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative and he is a member of the Board for America’s Central Port. He acknowledged stakeholders who joined him, Dennis Wilmsmeyer, executive director Americas Central Port, Susan Taylor of the Port of St. Louis, Dan Mecklenborg of Ingram Marine Company, Bill Pappé of the U.S. Maritime Administration, Col. Mitchell, commander of the St. Louis District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Aimee Andres, executive director of the Inland River Port & Terminal Association and Colin Wellenkamp, director of the Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative.

“This morning, we are here to witness a significant development toward sustainability developing the economy of the Mississippi River Valley – returning container movement back to the America’s Waterway,” he said. “This is not an easy undertaking. The effort requires key partnerships between the public and private sectors.”

Thompson told the audience America’s Central Port encompasses 75 square miles; transfers in excess of 4 million tons of product annually between river barges, railcars, and trucks; is the most northerly ice-free port on the Mississippi River, has a local economic impact of \$208 million annually; and supports over 1,300 jobs directly. Further, 80 million tons of products are shipped every year past the Port’s harbor facility.

“If you are unfamiliar with MRCTI, we are an association of 68 mayors from Minnesota to Louisiana along all 2,500 miles of waterway,” he said. “We just marked our third anniversary, so we are still quite new. But the mayors of the Mississippi River are fully committed to a one-river campaign to bring national resources back to the Mississippi and sustain the ecology and economy of America’s most important waterway. In fact, our theme for 2015 is the Mississippi River, America’s Original Main Street.’

“We believe the Maritime Administration Marine Highway Program presents a valuable opportunity for America’s original Main Street,” Thompson said. “Both designators of M-55 and M-35 have a set process through which we can realize what the Delta Regional Authority called ‘a renaissance for the Mississippi Rivers economy,’ with moving containers on the Mississippi River once again.”

Thompson said from 2006 to 2009, there was a profitable and active container line between Memphis and New Orleans.

“Cotton would be shipped down river to be transported to the east while lumber would be shipped-up river to Memphis,” he said. “The financial crisis dramatically reduced housing construction in the U.S. thus removing the demand for lumber and that reduced housing construction in the United States thus removing the demand for lumber and that part of the line fell away. Since you need to make money both up and down the river, this economic reality closed the container line in 2009.”

Thompson said market forces such as congestion at the coastal ports, limited rail build-out, and other intermodal realities are aligning to make the nation’s inland waterway system a competitive option for major shippers.

“That is why the Illinois Soybean Association is looking at containerizing their commodity,” he said. “That is why Home Depot and Wal-Mart have expanded this economy sustainability. Mayors along the waterway have been working since 2013 to restore the container movement to the Mississippi River.”



Thompson introduced his friend and colleague within the Mississippi River Cities & Towns Initiative, Mayor Francis Slay of St. Louis who has been working with Mayor Brown of Natchez, Mississippi to coordinate the MRCTI work on this project.”

At the end of his speech, Thompson said he wanted to take a moment to compliment Mayor Slay with his commitment to the Mississippi River as a source of commerce, beauty, recreation and life in general.

“Mayor Slay has had a great impact on how I see our river,” he said.

Slay said, “To understand why this development is so important, you have to have a picture of the tremendous freight demand that is coming in the near-term for all our cities.”

“According to U.S. Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation statistics, the U.S. freight transportation system moved more than 17.6 billion tons of goods valued at \$16.8 trillion in 2011,” Slay noted. “The Maritime Administration predicts the

U.S. will need to move an additional 14 billion tons of cargo by 2050 to accommodate population growth. This means we will need to almost double our freight movement capacity within thirty-five years. If we are to meet this demand and remain competitive in the global marketplace, all modes of freight movement will need to be maximized. On an intermodal level, this maximization is certain not happening for our inland waterways, yet.”

Slay added that 26 percent of commodities moving on the lower Mississippi River are exports, while 16 percent are imports. He added the vast majority of this freight flow is the non-containerized bulk. Even though container imports into the U.S. topped 30 million for 2014, very few of these containers moved on the inland waterway system and fewer still were delivered via the Mississippi River. As Mayor Thompson explained, this was not always the case, Slay said.

"Mayors along the Mississippi River, in an effort to sustainably build the river economy, and add jobs, and improve intermodal movement through their cities, have built a group of major stakeholders that have come together in a public/private venture to explore container shipping on the Mississippi River and how it can be made a reality," Slay said. "State departments of transportation have also been making overt steps to encourage containerized shipping on the inland waterway system."

Following Mayor Slay, Col. Anthony Mitchell , Commander of the U.S. Corps of Engineers Mississippi Valley Division, spoke of his vision for the role of the Inland Waterways and how the corps would keep them viable.

- 1. Innovation is continuing to improve sustainable and affordable transportation on our inland waterways.**
 - 2. The history and future of the St. Louis region are tied to the Mississippi River. The Corps is proud to be a partner in realizing the river's value to the region and nation.**
 - 3. The Corps' focus remains on operating and maintaining the navigation infrastructure that keeps the river open for business.**
- The Mississippi River is a vital artery for commerce for the region and nation.
 - The Corps' role is to provide a reliable channel for river transportation to move.
 - We do that through effective water management, operation and maintenance of our Locks and Dams, dredging, and innovative River Engineering.
 - The growth of St. Louis is directly tied to the first steamer arriving nearly 200 years ago, and the river continues to play a vital role in our region's economy.
 - More than 100 million tons of commodities through St. Louis Harbor each year. Overall, America's inland waterways system moves 566 million tons a year and creates an economic impact of more than \$180 billion annually.

- With America's focus on sustainable solutions, it's encouraging to see our partners in government and industry looking for new opportunities to enhance the value of the river.

The Corps' focus remains on operating and maintaining the navigation infrastructure that keeps the river open for business.

- The Corps is performing repairs and maintenance on our locks and dams to ensure the reliability of our aging infrastructure.
 - Work ongoing to replace the downstream protection cell at L&D 27 (replacing a cell that failed during drought Sept. 2012). The last closure date is tentatively set for April 16, 2015 to complete remaining work.
 - Auxiliary chamber is currently closed for maintenance until 11 May.
- We continue to find ways to reduce the cost and improve the reliability of the channel through river engineering and innovations in dredging to benefit our economy and environment.
 - River training structures use the energy of the river to move sediment, saving millions in dredging costs each year.
 - The spill barge Thomas N. George's completes a flexible dredge pipe assembly that will improve the versatility and beneficial reuse of Mississippi River dredging by allowing us to build habitat in the river while performing maintenance dredging.

Speakers on Thursday included:

Tom Thompson – Mayor of Grafton

Francis Slay – Mayor of St. Louis

Dan Mecklenborg – Senior VP/Chief Legal Officer, Ingram Barge Company

Colonel Anthony Mitchell – Commander/District Engineer, US Army Corp of Engineers

Aimee Andres – Executive Director of Inland Rivers, Ports and Terminals, Inc.



[Pat Schwarte also contributed to this story.](#)