

Itâ€™s a cliché to say that the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System is northeast Oklahomaâ€™s best kept secret. Cliches, however, are clichés because they are true or because they are apt descriptions. But those who understand the systemâ€™s importance know how valuable it and its ports are to all of Oklahoma as well as surrounding states.

The Port of Catoosa is no secret as far as Bob Portis, the port director, is concerned. And he has spent the past 40 years telling anyone who will listen about the port and its success. And, over those years, he has been at the helm as the port has grown to impressive proportions. In my years as a reporter and editor in the newsroom, there was an affectionate joke that was passed around. Whenever someone would mention that they had just spoken with or were planning to call Portis, one or more reporters would excitedly say in their best Portis impression, “Port tonnage, up, up, up!” In fact, port tonnage, the amount of tons of goods shipped out of the port, was almost always up, and Portis was always happy to talk about it. He still is. Portis, has been the portâ€™s best ambassador since the day he stepped into the office. As for that tonnage, itâ€™s certainly no joke. In 2013, inbound-outbound shipping at the port totaled more than 2.7 million tons, representing \$1.35 billion in commerce. It fell only one bargeload short of the all-time record set in 2012. For the entire 445-mile length of the navigation system, the 2013 total was 12.1 million tons, with a value of \$3.85 billion. Oklahomaâ€™s total -- there are other, smaller, ports along the way -- was 6.1 million tons, with a value of \$2.41 billion. There are far too many important statistics for the port and the system to list here, but here are just a few: • The Port of Catoosa is a 2,500-acre inland, international seaport; • It is home to 70 businesses; • It employs more than 4,000 Oklahomans; the vast majority are employees of private companies; • It has seven liquid cargo loading and unloading areas; • It has a 5.5-million-bushel grain handling

facility;  It has a 50,000-ton capacity warehouse, six concrete domes with a total capacity of 30,000 tons and 50,000 tons of open storage;  It can load or unload from barges, rail or trucks at rates up to 400 tons per hour;  The entire system includes the Verdigris, Arkansas and White rivers;  The system provides water supplies, fish and wildlife habitat, recreation, hydropower generation and, in some places, flood control. And such statistics, although less dramatic, can be listed all along the navigation system. Of course, iron and steel are one of the port's most important commodities, especially when the region is experiencing an oil boom. And petroleum products play a huge role in the port's business. Still, agriculture is a major player at the Port of Catoosa and all along the system. Farmers throughout the region know how important the port is for getting their crops to market. Shipping goods by barge is efficient, economical and green. One towboat, can carry 1,500 tons of cargo. That's the equivalent of 60 semi-truck loads. Twelve barges, driven by one towboat, can move the equivalent of 720 semi-trucks. That's 720 trucks not burning diesel and not damaging our highways. It is not, however, a means to end the trucking industry, but a way to enhance it. So, all is rosy at the Port of Catoosa and all along the system. Not quite. The navigation system, pushed through Congress during the 1940s and 1950s by Sen. Bob Kerr of Oklahoma and Sen. John McClellan of Arkansas, has been a success and has more than paid for the initial investment of \$1.2 billion. But there are rough waters ahead. The system is getting old. Without help, its future is in jeopardy. That means that making improvements and providing needed maintenance is crucial. The locks and dams along the system are in dire need of repair and, in some cases, replacement, and have been for years. Such work has been ignored for far too long. The system desperately needs Congress to fund repairs and possibly even deepen the channel from nine to 12 feet. There is some talk of acquiring funding from Congress and then forming

a multi-state authority that could float a bond, infusing money and then charging a tonnage fee that would pay off the bond and provide enough money for future maintenance. That idea, however, needs to be fully vetted with input from state and federal officials, private companies and the taxpayers. For now, the Port of Catoosa and the entire navigation system must be kept viable. It's simply too important to the region and the nation, and the money invested must not go to waste. Jobs at the port account for a \$350 million annual payroll. It is imperative that Congress act, and soon. The failure of one lock along the route could cost Oklahoma no less than \$2 million a day. And that is no secret.