

STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE SUBCOMMITTEE
ON WATER RESOURCES AND ENVIRONMENT
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
THE COST OF DOING NOTHING: WHY FULL UTILIZATION OF THE HARBOR
MAINTENANCE TRUST FUND AND INVESTMENT IN OUR NATION'S
WATERWAYS MATTER

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Good morning, Chairwoman Napolitano, Ranking Member Westerman and members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about the importance of fully utilizing Harbor Maintenance Tax revenue to ensure the Army Corps of Engineers is able to maintain navigation channels and jetties at small ports in the Pacific Northwest, and around the country.

I'm here from Bandon, Oregon, which has a population of 3,112. I have been a commercial fisherman for most of my life. I'm a small business owner. And I'm a port commissioner for the Port of Bandon. I should be home preparing my boat for its annual maintenance but I have something I need to talk with you about.

I've been involved in the seafood business from research to retail for most of the past 50 years. As a commercial fisherman I've crossed every bar from San Francisco to Canada at one time or another. Now I fish primarily for tuna off of Oregon and Washington. Our region's tuna fleet includes about 600 boats.

My brother and I pack our boat with supplies for two weeks at a time and spend most of that time between 100 and 200 miles off shore. Because our boats are only capable of about 7 knots in heavy weather, and because we are so far offshore, if unsafe weather is forecasted, we must go into whatever harbor is closest. If the forecast is wrong, we can be in a situation where our only course is downwind to whatever port is on that trajectory. This is where the term "safe harbor" comes from. When weather is bad, any harbor, big or small, is safer than being at sea.

So from a fisherman's perspective EVERY port, large and small, is important. Whether we can use a particular port for safe harbor has everything to do with the condition of the bar.

The term "bar" may not be familiar to everyone here, but for people in the Pacific Northwest that take boats out into the ocean, understanding of this term is a matter of life or death. Bar is the term used for the point where the harbor entrance, in my region normally near the mouth of a

river, forms a “hump” where sediment builds up as the downstream river water comes up against the ocean waves. During ebb tides, river and tidal flows combine to create a stronger current that comes up against the incoming ocean swell. If the swell is large and the bar is shallow, the energy of the swell is tipped-over resulting in a “breaker”. Breakers are dramatically steeper than the swell and the life threatening danger is when a boat is attempting to come into the entrance, and the boat encounters a “sneaker” wave that is larger than expected – the wave steepens, and the boat goes out of control as it essentially turns into a surfboard, goes broadside and rolls over. This dangerous condition is referred to as a “breaking bar”.

It wasn't until I came to D.C. the first time advocating for dredging of the bars of our small ports that I realized breaking bars are a phenomenon mostly unique to the Pacific Northwest. Until that realization dawned, I couldn't understand how budget-after-budget could zero out small port dredging when so many lives are at stake.

There are a couple of ways to minimize the threat of a breaking bar. One way is for the Army Corp of Engineers to build jetties that steer the current a few degrees off the dominant swell direction. This was done on every bar in the Pacific Northwest many, many decades ago, but today, most of those jetties are in dire need of repair and are getting less and less effective. Another way to minimize the deadliness of a breaking bar is to regularly dredge out the sediment that builds up every year from the torrential rains that characterize the Pacific Northwest coast.

There is one thing that both of these have in common, and that is funding. The Portland District of the Army Corp of Engineers does a fantastic job maintaining our jetties and dredging our navigation channels given the resources made available to them by Congress. But when sufficient funding for these activities is not available, as is often the case for small ports, the bar shallows, and breaks, and inevitably, lives are lost.

For me, safety is paramount. But for thousands of others on the Oregon coast and around the country, their economic livelihood is tied to the maintenance of navigation channels and jetties.

Oregon's ports and harbors rank amongst our state's most valuable assets and are critical to maintaining and creating jobs across our great state. In Oregon there are 15 communities with small ports with ocean access. Nearly all of these ports are located in rural communities. In every one of those communities the port is the equivalent of their anchor business. These small ports provide an important employment base and are often primary drivers of local prosperity. They are hubs for international trade, recreation, and commercial fishing.

The Port of Bandon is a case study for this. Our port attracts approximately 300 vessels per year, and has gained a strong tourism presence through sport-fishing and recreational crabbing. Tourists enjoy a full range of recreational activities including full marina facilities, crab docking, a scenic river walk and nature pathway, amphitheater and a new boardwalk. The Bandon Marina includes a public boat ramp and 90 moorage slips that are typically occupied, especially in the summer months. In addition to the Bandon Marina, crab dock and boat launch, the Port of Bandon owns several real estate holdings that provide lease space for businesses. A Coast Guard motor lifeboat is based in the Port marina during summer months.

The Port of Bandon, along with approximately 54 port-related businesses, employs an estimated 484 workers. This includes a charter service, a bait shop, two fish markets, two marine insurance businesses, as well as numerous restaurants and hotels. We contracted a study in 2014 of the impact of our port on the local economy. It found that \$62 million (\$35.1 million direct and \$27 million indirect/induced) of economic benefit is generated annually by our port as the result of the funding that allows the Army Corps of Engineers to maintain our navigation channels and jetties. This output results in nearly \$5 million in federal tax payments returned to the treasury due to our access to the sea.

Operation and Maintenance of our nation's navigation infrastructure is a Federal responsibility. Yet small ports around the country have to fight like heck for funding that will allow the Army Corps of Engineers to do its job. The real shame is that it doesn't have to be this way.

Due to the leadership of this committee, we have seen a substantial increase in the amount of harbor maintenance tax revenue that is dedicated to dredging and jetty maintenance. But a lot of this money is still being used to fund other government programs or to balance the federal budget. This is why I appreciate your continuing efforts to get to full utilization of the harbor maintenance trust fund.

Thank you, again, for the opportunity to talk about what funding means to me, my community, and to rural communities around the country. I have included additional documentation to support my testimony, including an illustration of the breaking bar that I described, and a chart that provides additional detail about the dangers of breaking bars in the Pacific Northwest.

I know it may not make sense to you but if everything you have is wrapped up in your boat, and your boat feeds your family, you go fishing. Even when everything is optimal some of us don't make it home. I'm here asking you to give us the best chance you can, so we can make it in, and home, to our families.