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Single-hulled barges threaten Missouri, Mississippi rivers

Every year, 100 million gallons of hazardous material travels through the waterways of the upper Mississippi River. Twenty percent of this dangerous cargo is transported in barges with single-layer hulls only $\frac{3}{8}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick.

Last August, the U.S. Coast Guard estimated there were 700 single-hulled barges carrying ecologically hazardous liquids on the Mississippi and Missouri rivers. When these barges collide with another vessel or a bridge, they can easily spill their contents. More modern, double-hulled barges are 50 percent more effective in preventing spills during an accident.

Double hulled barges have two layers of steel, 2 to 4 feet apart, protecting their cargo. This year alone, the use of double-hulled barges prevented two major spills on the Mississippi.

In January, three barges loaded with jet fuel were traveling along the Mississippi when one of the barges broke loose, drifted down river and crashed onto a rock dike near Crystal City, tearing a hole in its hull. Fortunately, this vessel was double-hulled, and only the outer hull was damaged — 1 million gallons of jet fuel was safely contained by the inner hull.

At the time of the incident, Lt. Cmdr. Al Peek of the Coast Guard said "if it had been the single-skin barge, there's a very good chance that it might have pierced the hull. The fact it was a double hull kept a million gallons of fuel in the tanks."

More recently, a double-hulled barge carrying 900,000 gallons of heavy oil crashed into a bridge 30 miles upstream from New Orleans. This time, both hulls were damaged, and 4,200 gallons of the oil spilled into the river, causing some communities to turn off drinking water intakes. However, it was clear to observers that if this had been a single-hulled barge the spill would have been much more devastating to both the river environment and the economy.

Despite the clear risk involved, single-hulled barges filled with hazardous liquids such as farm pesticides, gasoline and oil still cruise our waterways. At risk are some 236,000 acres of national wildlife refuges and conservation areas that line the upper Mississippi waterways and a \$1.6 billion per year recreation industry.

River biologists agree that river dynamics would make a major spill on one of our big rivers nearly impossible to clean up.

In a 1989 letter to the U.S. Coast Guard, Upper Mississippi National Wildlife Refuge manager Rick Berry said, "The continued indiscriminate

use of single-hull barges to transport hazardous cargo within the boundaries of the refuge is incompatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established." Berry tried to stop the transportation of toxic materials in single-hulled barges through the refuge but was thwarted by the Bush administration.

Environmental groups have lobbied hard over the past four years for federal rules that would accelerate efforts to phase out single-hulled barges, but to no avail.

The Oil Pollution Act of 1990, passed after the Exxon Valdez disaster, requires that single-hulled barges be phased out by the year 2015. So we have 22 more years to play "river roulette."

Four states — Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota — are currently considering ways to reduce the risk of single-hulled barge spills. One proposal imposes a fee on single-hulled barges carrying ecologically hazardous materials. The money from this fee would be placed in an account to pay for cleaning up any future spills. Operators would get their money back if they retired their single-hulled barges for double-hulled ones.

Another proposal requires that single-hulled barges carrying hazardous cargo be surrounded with double-hulled barges when placed in a large tow.

The barge industry — represented by the American Waterways Operators — asserts that a shift to single-hulled barges before 2015 would be unfair to their industry. This industry is not willing to compromise. It is unwilling even to consider placing the single-hulled barges between double-hulled barges when running large tows.

The barge industry has tried to downplay the danger that single-hulled barges pose by saying that there has never been a catastrophic spill on the upper Mississippi. True, but there had likewise never been a catastrophic spill in Prince William Sound before the Valdez disaster. Or in the Shetland Islands until this past January.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.