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Caitlyn E. Stewart
Vice President – Regulatory Affairs

August 13, 2025

Ms. Cathy Gautreaux
Deputy Assistant Secretary for Multimodal Freight Infrastructure Policy
Department of Transportation
Office of the Secretary
1200 New Jersey Ave., SE
Washington, DC 20590

Re: National Freight Strategic Plan 2025 Update:
Request for Information (Docket No. DOT-
OST-2025-0369)

Dear Ms. Gautreaux:

The American Waterways Operators (AWO) is the tugboat, towboat, and barge industry's advocate, resource, and united voice for safe, sustainable, and efficient transportation on America's waterways, oceans, and coasts. Our industry is the largest segment of the nation's 40,000-vessel domestic maritime fleet and moves 665 million tons of cargo each year safely and efficiently. On behalf of our more than 300 member companies, we appreciate the opportunity to comment on the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DOT) 2025 update to the National Freight Strategic Plan (NFSP).

As DOT updates the NFSP, we encourage you to consider the maritime mode's importance to the multimodal transportation system. Specifically, the tugboat, towboat, and barge industry – the largest segment of the U.S.-flag fleet – is the safest, most efficient, and most environmentally friendly method of moving freight. It is also the only mode with the capacity to take on a significant amount of new cargo. Identifying opportunities to move commodities by barge and shift cargo from landside modes to the waterways serves the NFSP's overarching goals of promoting safety and innovation and improving infrastructure, as well as several of the plan's strategic objectives. With this in mind, we offer the following suggestions for actions that DOT and the Maritime Administration (MARAD) can take to enhance the maritime industry's role in multimodal freight movement.

1. Create Maritime Opportunity

- a. DOT and MARAD should explore opportunities for increased maritime freight transportation in alignment with the Maritime Action Plan detailed in President Trump's Executive Order on *Restoring America's Maritime Dominance* by:

- i. Working with regional maritime stakeholders to determine what improvements are needed (vessels, port equipment and infrastructure, etc.) to facilitate maritime transport of key commodities, especially essential energy cargoes.
 - ii. Determining whether there are any statutory or regulatory impediments at the federal or state levels to shifting cargo to the marine transportation system from landside modes.
- b. DOT and MARAD should continue to promote and advance the public benefits of maritime transportation, such as improving supply chain resilience, relieving landside congestion, and reducing air emissions by:
 - i. Promoting projects that expand the U.S. Marine Highway Program (USMHP) and benefit the surrounding communities, including leveraging opportunities available through rural and tribal transportation programs.
 - ii. Utilizing the Marine Environmental and Technical Assistance Program and the U.S. Center for Maritime Innovation to support the development and deployment of innovative maritime technologies.

2. Grow Maritime Demand

- a. DOT and MARAD should lead the public and private sectors in improving and expanding maritime transportation by:
 - i. Coordinating with other DOT modal administrations such as the Federal Highway Administration and the Federal Railroad Administration, other federal agencies, and with public and private transportation entities to explore ways to improve and expand public and private barge services; identify and promote transport of new cargoes by barge; and provide information about barge transportation opportunities to rural and tribal communities.
 - ii. Coordinating with State DOTs through the State Freight Planning process to explore additional opportunities to develop maritime highway transportation routes and services.
- b. DOT and MARAD should coordinate with other federal agencies to better integrate Marine Highway Routes into the Nation's multimodal network to ensure shippers are aware of the benefits of maritime transportation by:
 - i. Leveraging participation in the National Port Readiness Network and the U.S. Committee on the Marine Transportation System (CMTS) to identify a Strategic Marine Highway Network (SMHN) to achieve full multimodal transportation network integration.
 - ii. Working with ports to update the port infrastructure inventory list maintained by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Bureau of Transportation Statistics to ensure that ports have the equipment and infrastructure needed to load and offload new commodity types and volumes.
 - iii. Conducting a nationwide Maritime Highway Transportation study, which would include all U.S. ports and Marine Highway routes, to identify opportunities for increased maritime transport in the United States and to assist in the development of a National SMHN.
 - iv. Convening major shippers with public and private maritime transportation stakeholders to identify opportunities to use maritime transportation to meet their needs.

3. Improve Intergovernmental Coordination

- a. DOT and MARAD should develop memoranda of understanding with the Department of Defense, Department of Agriculture, and other federal agencies to encourage the use of the Marine Highway System to transport federally owned, procured, financed, or generated cargo. This would generate improvements to national security and military readiness, enhancements to freight fluidities, and upgraded supply chain resilience.

4. Support Domestic Shipbuilding

- a. DOT and MARAD should ensure that any new programs to enhance American shipbuilding capacity offer support to the shipyards used to build and repair America's domestic fleet of commercial vessels. This would allow America's domestic fleet to benefit from technological advancements, workforce development, and improved supply chains that will result from investments in the maritime industrial base.

Thank you again for the opportunity to comment. I would be pleased to provide additional comments or further information as you see fit.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Caitlyn E. Stewart". The ink is dark and the signature is fluid.

Caitlyn E. Stewart
Vice President – Regulatory Affairs