

Brazil Explores Only 2% of Its Rivers for Transport

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Brazil has one of the largest water basins on the planet; the highway system cannot transport all the goods produced in the country; water transport is cheaper. None of these facts, state critics, have been enough to sway the Brazilian government attention to water transport.

According to the Transportation Minister himself, water transport is five times cheaper than highway transport, and three times cheaper than using railways.

This is due to the amount of cargo transported.

"A truck can transport around 35 tons. A barge can transport 20,000 tons," said Paulo Augusto Vivacqua, president of Corredor Atlântico, a non-profit organization that focuses on discussing ways to simplify infrastructure and logistics promoting greater connection between Brazil and Latin America.

Still, the country only explores around 2% of its water capacity, estimates Vivacqua. According to him, the system could transport up to 100 million tons of goods, but currently transports just 2 million.

The main reason for this low use is the priority given to highway transport.

"Brazil made a clear option for highways in the twentieth century. The fact that many industries in the country were built on highways, not railways or waterways, goes to show this," stated Vivacqua.

"This is a distortion of strategic thinking, as the land system is much more expensive."

In the Ministry accounts, 63% of cargo transport is on highways; 24%, on railways; and 13% by water. Of this 13%, just 5% is on rivers.

The target, however, is to increase the figure.

"We want to reach 20%," declared the director of the Transportation Ministry Water Transport Secretariat, Paulo de Tarso.

Vocation

Specialists say that there is potential. But it is not explored.

"The potential of Brazilian waterways is still not translated into transport potential," says a 2002 study by the National Confederation of Transport (CNT).

According to the study, the main waterways in the country are: Tietê-Paraná (from the southeast to southern Brazil), São Francisco (from the Brazilian midwest to the northeast), Paraná-Paraguay (a waterway involving all countries in Prata River basin: Bolivia, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay and Argentina), Araguaia-Tocantins (from the Midwest to the North), as well as other rivers in the Amazon basin and in the Southeastern basin.

To the CNT, the "vocation" of Brazilian waterways is the transport of agricultural products, material for the sector,

including fertilizers and fuels, as well as products like iron ore.

"Various large rivers on the right bank of the Amazon river, among them Tocantins, Xingu, Tapajós, and Madeira, are already generating business interest as they can simplify transport from agricultural poles in the states of Mato Grosso, Goiás (both in the Midwest), Tocantins, Rondônia, and Pará (in the North), to markets in Europe and Asia," shows the study.

"With regard to the São Francisco, Paraná-Paraguay, Tietê-Paraná river basins, and to rivers in the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, they are relatively significant in the regions, as they are in areas of significant agricultural development for the country," explains the study.

Investment

A lot of work must be done to these waterways, but Vivacqua believes that the cost-benefit of this investment, when compared to funds necessary for highway recovery, for example, is much larger.

According to him, investment of around US\$ 65 million would be sufficient to make the Paraná-Paraguay and Araguaia-Tocantins waterways "top notch."

These waterways together cover extensions of 5,000 kilometers.

So as to finish duplication of two highways, to start work on a third, and to pave the main roads used for harvest transport, the federal government has announced investment of almost US\$ 200 million.

In 2004, the Transportation Ministry is turning around US\$ 325 million to "maintenance and recuperation" of highways. Up to April 2005 the government is planning on investing around US\$ 650 million in the recovery of 25% of the federal highway system.

"Waterway maintenance is also cheaper. Initial investment is necessary, for removal of obstacles in the riverbed - such as rocks, for example - and to put signs up. After that, very little is necessary," recalls the specialist.

Regional Development

For the government, waterway development may also bring additional benefits: "economic, social, demographic, and environmental development" of locations in the vicinity, says the CNT study.

According to the organization, this is what happened in the United States and in European countries.

"Although work on rivers always generates navigation, the main objective is regional development, flood control, and rational and harmonious use of water."

One disadvantage of water transport is time. Vivacqua admits it is a slower system.

"Cargo that takes two days to reach its destination by truck may take as much as four by boat," he stated.

"But it is also necessary to take into consideration the condition of the highways, their safety, and also the lower cost. If time is not critical, waterways are certainly the best option."

This report is part of a series of articles on transport in Brazil prepared by ANBA – Brazil-Arab News Agency - www.anba.com.br