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Congress passes 5-Year Highway Funding Bill: On Friday, December 4, President Obama signed into law, H.R. 3763, the Surface Transportation Reauthorization and Reform Act of 2015. The bill provides \$305B in funds for highway, bridge and mass transit programs, including: transportation infrastructure, the Sport Fish Restoration and Boating Trust Fund (SFRBTF) and reauthorization of the Export-Import Bank. This is the first time in ten years that the Highway bill has been reauthorized for five years. The SFRBTF is indeed good news for the Recreational Boating Community since it provides funds to the Boating Infrastructure Grants (BIG) program for funding boating infrastructure, pump out facilities and boat ramps.

The BIG program is administered by the US Fish & Wildlife Service, which receives approximately 2% of the Trust Fund annually. Grants under the BIG program, when approved, are used to construct, renovate and maintain tie-up facilities with accommodations for boats 26 feet or more in length. Applicants may apply for grants by contacting **WSFR** or go to **grants.gov**.

Funding is obtained from a “user pay – user benefit” tax system. Taxes on fishing equipment, boat fuel, imported boats and small engines are combined to create the fund, with about \$625M of revenue annually. In turn, the funds are then allocated to federal and state programs for wetlands restoration, sport fish restoration, boating access and funding for the U.S. Coast Guards Recreational Boating Safety program and the annual National Recreational Boating Safety Survey. This new law provides for continuation of these vital programs and even some enhancements to them.

A special thanks to Jeff Hoedt and Van Burgess, of the U.S. Coast Guard, for providing some of this valuable information on the SFRBTF.

The EPA Increases Ethanol Volumes in the Renewable Fuel Standards through 2016: Meeting its legally required deadline, the EPA finalized the 2014, 2015 and 2016 Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) volume obligations as reported by the NMMA. While the ruling falls short of the worst-case scenario, it still mandates the breaking of the “blend wall” in 2016. The blend wall is the amount of ethanol in the overall fuel supply that can be tolerated without engine damage. Due to this ruling, more ethanol, largely in the form of E15, will be required across the country’s fuel supply. This remains problematic for boat owners and marine businesses as these higher blends of ethanol will damage engines, present grave safety concerns and void warranties.

In its rule making, the EPA acknowledged the comments and testimony from NMMA and thousands of other industry supporters who found fault in the agency’s calculations of demand for ethanol-free gasoline (E0). NMMA disagrees with the EPA’s assertion that E0 is not a major fuel option and contends that anecdotal evidence from marina owners, boaters and other industry personnel proves that E0 remains the preferred fuel choice for recreational marine engines.

An excellent letter was sent to EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy, from Congress, expressing their concerns about the proposed 2016 ethanol volume increase and that it “would constitute a breach of the ethanol blendwall”, among other good points. The letter was signed by Congressman Goodlatte and four other members.

Government IG Looking into whether the EPA has complied with reporting requirements: The EPA Inspector General’s (IG) office is investigating whether or not the EPA has “complied with the reporting requirements of laws” set out by Congress, mandating that refiners blend ethanol into the fuel supply. The IG’s investigation to see if the EPA was properly reporting the environmental impact of the

RFS, comes right after the American Council for Capital Formation (ACFF) released a study claiming that mandating corn ethanol was damaging the environment and contributing more to global warming than conventional gasoline. ACFF's study concluded that "Corn ethanol's environmental record has failed to meet expectations across a number of metrics that include air pollutants, water contamination and soil erosion." ACFF is part of a coalition opposing the RFS. The coalition has launched TV ads to end **The Ethanol Mandate**.

NTSB Investigation into the Loss of the Cargo Ship El Faro: The National Transportation Safety Board conducted an investigation into the loss of the U.S. cargo ship El Faro. The 790 foot ship went missing during hurricane Joaquin on 1 October with 33 crew members, 28 of which were Americans. The NTSB contracted with the Navy who found the ship on 31 October in more than 15,000 feet of water using a Remotely Operated Vehicle. The ship was located in the vicinity of its last known position near Crooked Island Bahamas in an upright position but the navigation bridge structure and the deck below it had separated from the ship. The missing structure included the mast where the Voyage Data Recorder was mounted. On Nov. 11, the navigation bridge was found but neither the mast nor the VDR was found in the vicinity of the navigation bridge structure. After five more days of searching with CURV-21, it was determined that the VDR could not be located. The search and video documentation efforts of El Faro were completed on Nov. 15. At this time no further search efforts are planned.