

ITF Report - Drought & Inland Waterway Transport

Prelims: Current events of national and international importance | Environment

Why in News?

Recently, International Transport Forum (ITF) warned that drought-induced low river levels are disrupting inland navigation, reducing cargo capacity and increasing freight costs.



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International Transport Forum

ITF 2026 Summit

May 6 – 8, 2026 | Leipzig, Germany

Theme	Attendance	Presidency	New Members
"Funding Resilient Transport" 	 Over 1,000 participants from 80+ countries,  including more than 40 transport ministers.	 Hosted under the presidency of Azerbaijan.	Ghana, Panama, and Peru officially joined the International Transport Forum.    Ghana Panama Peru



Key Highlights of Report

River and Climate Indicators

- **Major affected European rivers** - It includes the **Rhine, Danube, Loire, and Po.**
- **Rhine** - Summer discharge may decrease by **up to 10% by 2050** under high-emission scenarios.
- In August 2026, Rhine barge capacity decreased to approximately 15% of normal levels, while Danube capacity declined to about 30%.
- **Amazon** - Severe droughts have disrupted river navigation and limited access to **food, fuel, medicines, and essential services.**

Importance of Inland Waterways

- Inland waterways account for **15 to 45 percent** of freight transport, measured in tonne-kilometres, in **Belgium, China, the Netherlands, and Romania**.
- **United States** - Approximately 92 percent of agricultural exports are transported via river systems.
- **Rhine** - The river serves as a major transport route for **fuels, chemicals, and grains**.

Economic and Supply Chain Impacts

- Low water levels reduce barge capacity, necessitating more trips, which increases freight costs, causes delays, leads to port congestion, and results in economic losses.
- **Germany** - Low-water conditions on the Rhine in 2018 were associated with a 0.4 percent decline in gross domestic product (GDP).
- Industrial production is estimated to decline by approximately 1 percent during a month of severe low-water conditions.

Challenges in Shifting to Alternative Transport Modes

- **Rail** - Rail networks are often already heavily utilized and are vulnerable to disruptions caused by **extreme heat**.
- **Road** - Shifting freight to road transport requires significantly greater capacity.
- A single barge with a capacity of 1,500 tonnes is equivalent to approximately 60 trucks, each carrying 25 tonnes.

Adaptation Strategies

- Enhancement of water-level forecasting capabilities
- Deployment of shallow-draft vessels
- Implementation of water retention measures during periods of high precipitation
- Regulated releases of reservoir water
- Execution of emergency dredging operations
- Pre-positioning of essential stocks and storage facilities
- Integration of inland waterways, rail, and road within multimodal transport systems
- Germany offers water-level forecasts extending up to six weeks for the Rhine, Danube, and Elbe rivers.

Reference

[Down to Earth | ITF Report](#)