

Transportation by Giuliana Sammartino

At last, a navigable Po

The Italian river of literary fame could become a waterway that revolutionizes Italy's creaking transport network.

The long-postponed dream of making Italy's greatest river, the Po, navigable, may finally come true. A bill recently passed by the Transportation Committee of the Italian Chamber of Deputies appropriates about \$1 billion over the next three years to make the Po, which runs west to east across northern Italy, navigable from Cremona to its outlet on the Adriatic Sea.

The project is vital to the national interest. Among other things, it will mean tremendous energy savings. The estimated cost of fuel to ship the same cargo in 1,350-ton vessels is over 1,000 times less than for overland methods. But creating the Po-Veneto water system has many other implications for the Italy that will be integrated into the bigger and freer Europe of 1992, with its 500 million people.

The Po Valley has been famous for 900 years for the "capital-intensive" exploitation, through irrigation and transport canals, of its immensely fertile land. In 1310 the poet Dante in his *Inferno* praised the engineering feat of the embankments of the Po in Padua. In 1342 Petrarch wrote his famous patriotic poem *Italia mia* on the banks of the Po. Around 1492, Leonardo da Vinci apparently envisioned a canal from Pavia, the town on the Po closest to Milan, to the western shore of Italy and the Tyrrhenian Sea. That canal would have given Milan its own port comparable to its mighty rival, Venice.

Since the middle of the 19th century, around the Po Valley's ultra-productive agriculture there have arisen

the greatest industrial concentrations of northern Italy, ringing Milan. Today, transportation and energy costs threaten to idle much of this economic potential.

In a recent interview, Christian Democratic deputy Hon. Giuseppe Torchio, the first sponsor of the bill, said that there is "no doubt" the Po project will open up the future of a new transportation structure in Italy. He explained, "The General Transportation Plan states that the development of cabotage and upgrading of the waterway system are two key steps in the strategic evolution of freight transport." Cabotage is short-range navigation between two coastal ports or two inland ports of one country.

"The Italian rail network, which is today substantially circumscribed to the Po region, is situated as an extension of cabotage from the sea to the Po industrial heartland. This links up with trucking, which thus functions as a transverse distribution vehicle off the main water arteries."

Giuseppe Torchio continued, "Besides building the overall network, we have to get to work right away to complete work already in progress to make what already exists functional. Top priority goes to the work of fixing the shallow river bed of the Po, and the related maintenance projects. We need to hurry to make up for lost time, both in the waterways and the railways."

A navigable Po, which opens a communications route to the Adriatic and hence to the Mediterranean, will make Italian products more competi-

tive. Torchio also points to "the compelling necessity, which everyone now recognizes, to set limits on road congestion, which has already assumed intolerable levels, even from an environmental standpoint. That means using other modes of freight transport (rail, waterway) with much lower social costs than trucking, and greater respect for natural and environmental values. We must transfer to waterways and railroads a significant volume of the current, constantly expanding freight traffic.

"We must aim at a policy of productive investments which allows us to utilize the large existing fixed capital," the parliament member went on, referring to the concentration of industrial plant in the Po Valley. "The business community, through the Confederation of Industry, has already shown its interest in waterway infrastructure and has produced studies and documents showing the potential for continuous waterway-maritime transport and industrial sites along the waterway system."

Though we live in an age of "free enterprise" mania, the Italian Confederation of Industry recognizes the state's role in fostering a project of this scale. The confederation, Torchio said, "has also indicated to Parliament and the government the need for its overall intervention in the management and organization of such works. This would involve the need to revise the rigging requirements for fresh-water vessels, tax exemptions for traffic on internal waters, the training of skilled navigation personnel, and so forth.

"Reducing the costs of finished goods depends also on lessening the businessman's costs in acquiring the transport service." So, "when you reach the bottom line, directly and indirectly this is a totally obvious necessity."