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Its Own Agenda

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Saturday, April 28, 2012

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What do Cincinnati, OH, North Bend, OH, Wellsville, OH, Mt. Vernon, IN, and Evansville, IN have in common?

Well, if you must know, these are just a few terminals (a facility where oil products are stored in large tanks until ready to be transported by truck to fueling stations) run by Marathon Petroleum Company (MPC) along the Ohio River. Though pipelines are a large contributor to the transport of crude oil products, the rivers are HUGE. In addition to the terminals listed above, MPC utilizes rivers like the Licking, Niagara, and Mississippi to move their valuable products. As an engineering co-op for MPC this semester, I was able to witness the importance of the rivers to this largely successful oil company.

Tasked with several dock inspection projects, I was called to work in conjunction with a variety of contractors to coordinate inspections of MPC docks along the rivers. The idea of a dock inspection is rather simple, swim around in the water and see if there are any holes in the float (a water vessel that barges align with in order to pump product to the storage tanks in the terminal). However, these simple inspections became quite the project when considering the river.

The river always seems to have a life and mind of its own, its own agenda. When it rains, the river swells and its swift current can cause major problems for the docks. Just this spring, I was on site for a “high water barge guide” project. In essence, the river had become such a severe factor in the operations of this dock facility that a week’s worth of construction was needed to install a system to help keep the float secure as the river rose with spring rain. Being one site for this project reminded me of how watersheds work. Many days, I would watch from the hydrograph on my computer, as rain in Cincinnati, OH would trickle into the Ohio River, rush down to hook up with the Mississippi, and then slide on down to the gulf—river levels rising all the way.

All I could do was laugh in amazement as I postponed yet another dock inspection...