The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway is a man-made, 234-mile-long inland water route which provides a link between two existing navigation waterways in the Southeastern United States. Year-round navigation is maintained on the 300-foot wide waterway with 10 locks and dams which impound more than 40,000 acres of surface water. The waterway has a total lift of 341 feet, which is three and one-half times greater than that of the Panama Canal.

The waterway’s primary purpose is to provide more efficient and economical movement of bulk commodities, such as coal, petroleum, minerals, chemicals, farm products, forest products, ores and steel, between the middle and eastern regions of the United States and the Gulf of Mexico. The waterway provides navigation savings to 14 states by reducing the distance between origins and destinations on the waterway and providing a more direct access to the Port of Mobile.

The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway is a connecting link, providing a direct north-south route for commercial and other vessels between the Tennessee River and the Gulf of Mexico via the Black Warrior River in Alabama.

The idea for the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was conceived in the early 1800s to provide a shorter, reliable water route to the Gulf of Mexico. However, 171 years elapsed between the time the Tenn-Tom was first officially studied until it became a reality. Construction began on the waterway in 1972, and the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was completed and opened for commercial traffic in January 1985, some 20 months ahead of schedule.

The Tenn-Tom is the largest civil works project ever undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, involving the movement of more than 307 million cubic yards of earth, which was more than was moved during the construction of the Panama Canal. Overall the project required more than 25 million man-hours of labor before reaching completion.

The estimated cost for the construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway was $1.84 billion in Federal costs and $153 million in local costs borne by the states of Alabama and Mississippi. Federal operating and maintenance costs are estimated at $18.5 million per year.

The construction of the waterway was authorized on the basis of economic benefit studies showing it would return more in national benefits over the first 50 years of its life than would be spent on its construction and operating costs.

The economic benefits of the waterway are virtually all national transportation savings. The Tenn-Tom is generally described as a “throughput” waterway, in that 80 percent of the commodities projected to move on it will transit the entire waterway rather than originate or terminate on some part of it. Much of the waterway’s usage is expected to derive from import and export of goods to and from the inland U.S.