

*Remarks for the
Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway Development Conference
October 24, 2001*

Good afternoon and thank you for the invitation to be here this afternoon. The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway offers much for our states, and I appreciate the work you do to make it successful.

I am looking forward to serving as chairman next year, following in a long line of other governors – including J. P. Coleman of Mississippi, who formed the original compact with Governor Jim Folsom of Alabama.

Mississippi, like the other states represented here, has a strong role to play in the Tenn-Tom and we will do just that. We are doing the work to position our state and our region to compete in the economy of the 21st century.

There are several areas I want to touch on briefly.

Mississippi is strategically located to take advantage of international trade, especially with Latin America. It is estimated that the trade between Latin America and the United States will triple in the next twenty years, and 85 percent of that trade will be shipped by water. With our two deepwater ports on the Gulf, we will make the most of this opportunity.

Further, we have excellent water transportation routes around the state, including the Mississippi River and six ports on the Tenn-Tom Waterway.

These facilities, according to a study by the Mississippi Department of Transportation, have a major impact on our state's economy, generating about \$1.4 billion annually and supporting some 33,000 jobs.

The same study, however, identified almost \$70 million in improvements needed at ports around the state. These improvements are essential in helping the ports handle current traffic.

To maximize the trade that we expect in the next twenty years, we need to invest almost \$100 million in these ports.

We have to invest in our infrastructure to make the most our economic future, and that's what we're planning to do.

Last spring, I signed legislation that established a multi-modal fund for capital improvements to ports, railroads, airports and mass transit. Our current fiscal situation has presented challenges for this fund, but we can and we will provide funds to improve these transportation and commerce hubs.

There's no denying the economic impact of the Tenn-Tom on our state and others. The barge rates and water supply have helped attract nearly \$1 billion in investments to the state since 1985, and there are still prime sites on the corridor for development.

Recreation has also been a major factor in economic growth. Every year, the waterway attracts over 3 million visitors, who generate almost \$200 million in additional spending. And, there's room for more.

My Mississippi Tourism Incentive Program will do much to enhance the recreational use of the waterway. The first project approved under this program was the Grand Harbor Marina and Condominium Complex, owned by Paul Callens – I believe Paul is here today – thank you, Paul, for your commitment to the Tenn-Tom.

Let me take a few minutes to talk with you about another asset for Mississippi's economic development.

The position of executive director at the Mississippi Development Authority is extremely important, and helps set the tone for the business climate in Mississippi.

You may be aware that I have recently announced a new executive director for the MDA. His name is Bob Rohrlack, and he will be coming to Mississippi from Gainesville, Florida.

Bob's credentials as an economic developer are impeccable, and I hope each of you will have an opportunity to meet and get to know Bob in the coming months.

Bob is a certified economic developer, and was the first CED in the nation to receive a master's degree in economic development. And where did he get this master's degree? The University of Southern Mississippi.

We're proud of that.

But we're also proud of what Bob is going to help accomplish in Mississippi, and I look forward to working with him. He begins his duties December 3, and we will be taking him around the state to visit with communities and business leaders.

At the basis of all our work, the foundation of everything we work to accomplish, is education. You are all aware that education is the top priority for my administration, and I'm proud of what we're doing.

We've passed a teacher pay package that will carry Mississippi from 49th in the nation to 19th in the nation, in terms of average teacher salary. That's exciting, because it demonstrates a commitment to the students who will be leading Mississippi in those years when our trade with other countries grows so much.

It's also exciting because other states are looking at what we're doing and holding it up as a standard.

The New York Times, one of the most respected newspapers in the nation, ran an editorial the day after we passed the pay package.

"Why can't New York do what Mississippi is doing?" it asked. That's good for Mississippi.

As you all well know, technology is playing an increasing role in our economy. We are entering an age where a good deal of the work is borderless, wireless and global. Our people have to have the skills to do that work.

With the "Computers in the Classroom" initiative, we are making sure they have those skills. By the end of next year, we will have an internet-accessible computer in every public school classroom in the state.

Mississippi will be the first state to do that.

It's good to be seen as a leader among the states, and I'm proud of what we're doing. You should be too.

There are many challenges in the years to come, for our state and our region. I know we are up to the challenges. I know we will take them on, and use them to create new opportunities for our people.

That is the role we have to play for Mississippi, and for the Tenn-Tom. I look forward to leading that role next year as your chairman.

Thank you.