

Stakeholders urge promotion of inland waterways for trade

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Stakeholders have emphasised on the need to promote navigational usage of inland waterways in the Ganga and Brahmaputra river basins for swifter and easier trade.

Speaking at a National Policy Dialogue meeting on expanding tradable benefits of trans-boundary water, they said Nepal can reap the benefits by getting linked through water with Bangladesh and India via the Ganges river basin as both these countries have a functional inland water transport system.

The meeting was organised by South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), in which the organisation also unveiled a study report on prospects of inland waterways in Nepal.

The study has recommended prospects of navigation to Ganga and Brahmaputra river basins from Nepal's Koshi river basin and Gandak river basin, where water transport is currently limited to boats used for river crossing.

“By getting linked to the Ganges River through inland waterways, Nepal can get access to Haldia port. This waterway access will facilitate domestic trade and bring down trading cost,” the report states.

As per the study carried out by SAWTEE, cost of freight per tonne per kilometre is around Rs 2.26 by railways. The cost to transport the same cargo over the same distance via road shoots up to Rs 4.1, while it would cost only Rs 1.7 through inland waterways.

Addressing the meeting, Posh Raj Pandey, chairman of SAWTEE, said that the government should undertake a comprehensive feasibility study of rivers to assess navigability and identify sites for possibility of upgrading existing traditional boats.

“The study shows that there is prospect of inland waterways that can be promoted for navigational usage. However, the government should form laws and guidelines to regulate inland waterways and define the socio-economic and environmental impact of inland waterways,” said Pandey.

On the occasion, Diwakar Nath Dhungel, former secretary of the then Ministry of Water Resources, and Madhav Belbase, joint secretary at Water and Energy Commission Secretariat under Ministry of Energy (MoE), said that a comprehensive study by the government on inland waterways and its prospect for navigational usage has to be carried out.

“Promoting domestic inland waterways for navigational usage is not so easy. A separate institution has to be formed to study the prospects of inland waterways in Nepal and its benefits in the country's trade,” Belbase said.

Informing that any type of additional mode of transport is a boon to every sector in Nepal, Rajan Sharma, former president of Freight Forwarders' Association of Nepal, urged the government to play a proactive role in identifying prospects of linking inland waterways to international trade.