



JOSEPH BONNEY

## Long overdue

Google “Corps of Engineers” and “boondoggle” and you get 43,900 references. For years the agency has been a punching bag for environmentalists and critics of what they see as wasteful pork-barrel spending.

The criticism intensified after Hurricane Katrina, when burst levees flooded most of New Orleans and the corps was forced to make the humbling admission that its flawed engineering was largely to blame.

Such a monumental screw-up hasn't helped with passage of legislation to authorize projects for the corps to build. Before approving the Water Resources Development Act, the Senate tacked on an amendment requiring a third-party review of large flood-control, navigation and environmental projects.

Water-transportation interests regard the amendment as overkill, and will try to soften it in a House-Senate conference committee. But they're heartened by the chances of WRDA passage this year, and hope they've turned a corner in their years-long effort to get waterway construction and maintenance back on track.

The legislation is overdue. If this year's bill clears Congress and is signed into law, it will be the first WRDA since 2000. Port and waterway groups are eager to get the process back on a two-year cycle so that needed navigation projects can be authorized without delay.

WRDA authorizes corps projects, which are funded through separate appropriation bills. Rep. David

Hobson, R-Ohio, chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's energy and water subcommittee, has worked to bring more order to a corps budgeting system that the Government Accountability Office last year described as uncoordinated.

Hobson's reforms, which include restricting the corps' shifting of money among projects, amount to “tough love” — an effort to make the agency more accountable and effective so that needed projects can be authorized and funded.

Water transportation is vital to the economy, and maintaining and improving waterway infrastructure is a federal responsibility. The latest version of WRDA authorizes work on port dredging projects and authorizes replacement locks and dams along the upper Mississippi and Illinois rivers.

Cliff Johnson, general manager of sales at TECO Transport, a barge line operating along those rivers, notes that the most efficient way to add transportation capacity is to increase velocity — move the same assets faster, so that they can carry more shipments in the same time. WRDA would do that by authorizing 1,200-foot-long locks that replace existing 600-foot locks that require barge tows to be broken up and reassembled.

Johnson also points out that construction projects that WRDA would authorize will help keep the existing system available to provide capacity to meet the increased demand that everyone forecasts. That may be the strongest argument for continued investment in the nation's waterways.

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