
September 24, 2012

Senate Panel Holds Hearing on Water Resources Development Act

The Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW) held a hearing last Thursday (9/20/12) on the Water Resource Development Act (WRDA) and the impact that a reauthorization of the port and waterway infrastructure law would have on the nation's economy and ensuring public safety. In her prepared statement, Committee Chairman Barbara Boxer (D-CA) stated her desire to move WRDA legislation through her Committee "later this year," with the likely expectation that it would be considered in the full Senate. Though the Ranking Republican on the panel, Senator James Inhofe (R-OK), was not in attendance, he indicated in his prepared opening statement that funding spent on "water resources infrastructure provides a good return on our investment" in terms of jobs and economic output. Both Senators touched on the cooperative effort they had achieved during the debate over the Highway bill as a model for WRDA legislation.

Among those advocating for moving forward with a WRDA bill was Senator Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), who added the "nation's water infrastructure is indisputably crumbling" and shoreline protection should be added to a WRDA bill moving forward. He also advocated an extension of the Army Corps of Engineers' (the Corps) Continuing Authorities Program (CAP) limits, as they were not adjusted for either inflation or construction cost increases. Under CAP, the Corps is able to undertake "small" projects without a Congressional authorization. Senator Whitehouse noted that a number of Rhode Island's more than 700 dams were at risk for failure, which could significantly affect people's lives in the Ocean State.

Andrew Herrmann, P.E., the President of the American Society of Civil Engineers, stated at the hearing that continued underinvestment in infrastructure is causing and will continue to cause serious problems, citing an investment gap of \$16 billion between now and 2020. He also said that Congress needed to add a section to any WRDA bill that is passed based on the [Dam Safety Act of 2012](#) (S. 3362), which would reauthorize the Dam Safety Program through 2016, and set funding amounts for such things as dam inspection and training. Jerry A. Bridges, a Chairman of the Board of the American Association of Port Authorities and the Executive Director of the Virginia Port Authority stated that the federal government was not living up to its partnership role in terms of "financing new infrastructure and channel improvement projects." He also emphasized the importance of dredging, as it affects all parts of ports, from the docks and the terminals to the yards. Rick Calhoun, the President of Cargo Carriers of Cargill, Inc. stated it was not just the coastal states that would be affected by a new WRDA, noting that inland waterways require extensive attention. Mr. Calhoun stated that "on rivers we must rely on technology from the 1930s" to move traffic, adding that many of the locks need to be modernized.

Jeffrey Soth, the Assistant Director of the Legislative and Political Department at the International Union of

Operating Engineers, who answered several questions from Senator Boxer, stated that 88 percent of the jobs in this industry were private sector jobs, and had some of the highest-paying salaries for production and non-supervisory jobs. He noted that pay was \$25 per hour versus \$19.75 per hour for production workers elsewhere in the economy, not to mention the Operations Engineer Union health and welfare benefits.

Senator David Vitter (R-LA) stated that he would like to see major reforms to the Corps as part of WRDA. He further indicated support for legislation which ensures funds credited to the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund are actually used for Harbor Maintenance. Janet Kavinoky, the Executive Director of Transportation and Infrastructure, and the Vice President of the Americans for Transportation Mobility Coalition of the United States Chamber of Commerce joined Senator Vitter in support of such legislation, the [Realize America's Maritime Promise](#) (RAMP) Act (H.R. 104). Authored by Senator Vitter's fellow Louisianan, Rep. Charles Boustany, H.R. 104 has nearly 200 House co-sponsors, while a similar Senate measure ([S. 412](#)) is supported by 38 members.

Senator Boxer indicated she felt she could move forward with a bill that did not specifically "earmark" projects, as congressional leaders have formally turned-away from such specific set-asides. She stated she would "shop around" WRDA legislation to several key colleagues including Senator Inhofe and Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) in the days ahead to solicit their input. The Congressional "lame duck" (i.e., post-election) session is scheduled to commence on November 13, and could last from 2 to 6 weeks.

For a link to the EPW Committee Website for testimony from Thursday's hearing, [please click here](#).