

## ARMY CORPS:

### Lawmakers, stakeholders gird for WRDA push

Tiffany Stecker, E&E reporter

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House lawmakers called for more transparency in the Army Corps of Engineers' spending yesterday ahead of work on legislation that would authorize waterway and wetland projects.

Speaking at an informal discussion hosted by a House Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee yesterday, Louisiana Rep. Garret Graves (R) said the Army Corps collects money from local governments for one project -- harbor maintenance or lock maintenance on an inland waterway, as examples -- and spends that cash on other work.

"If I took some campaign contribution and I said, 'You know what, I'm going to go buy myself a nice car,' I'd go to jail, and I should," Graves said. "Yet here, we just do it and it's fine."

He suggested privatizing Army Corps projects instead of "leading on" local communities for decades about when work will get done.

"The best way to get a project funded is a hurricane," he said. "It's crazy what we're doing."

Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee Chairman Bob Gibbs (R-Ohio) said he hopes the House will vote on the 2016 Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA, which would authorize the Army Corps' work on navigation channels, flood control, beach rebuilding and other projects.

Army Corps officials, he said after the gathering, must "improve their communications skills with the local stakeholders."

Rep. Lois Frankel (D-Fla.) said the ban on earmarks makes it difficult to fund new technologies for Army Corps projects.

"I would [like for] us to look at that issue, how we cannot be accused of earmarking but allowed to actually save money and do things differently," she said.

The subcommittee invited communities and businesses affected by WRDA projects to offer recommendations for the bill.

Said Amy Larson, president of the National Waterways Conference, "I think all of us stand here ready to help with that process."

The Army Corps often views state and local agencies as "stakeholders" rather than public servants, said Dusty Williams, immediate past president of the National Association of Flood and Stormwater Management Agencies.

"I think that mentality has to change to think of local agencies as partners," Williams said. "That's when we get things done: Don't dictate, don't tell us how to do it; work with us to get it done."

A lack of money has hamstrung the Army Corps' permitting, said Kristin Meira, executive director of the Pacific Northwest Waterways Association.

"We have salmon and lots of other [Endangered Species Act] listings that can make the regulatory process very challenging," she said.

Her group, she said, has worked with lawmakers on a program that allows nonfederal entities to provide money for hiring staffers at local Army Corps districts.

Derek Brockbank, executive director of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association, said the Army Corps should set a 10-year schedule of priorities for beaches, as well as streamline coastal projects with research.

And Kathy Broadwater, deputy executive director of the Maryland Port Administration, suggested that the Army Corps hold a meeting early in the process of studying a project, before a local sponsor is asked to sign a cost-share agreement.

Though Congress is supposed to pass WRDA every two years, the process has become irregular.

In 2014, Congress passed the Water Resources and Reform Development Act, which sets up a process by which the Army Corps solicits project ideas from communities and forwards them to lawmakers in an annual report. This allows members to name individual projects in a bill and avoid the earmark ban.

The Army Corps' first report from last year angered lawmakers, who said the agency applied its own criteria to determine which projects made the list.

Nineteen of the 114 projects that local entities submitted were included in the report last year. The rest were placed in an appendix with brief explanations for why they weren't in the report ([E&E Daily](#), April 24, 2015).

"That gave me a little bit of heartburn," said Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.).

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Twitter: [@TiffanyStecker](#) | Email: [tstecker@eenews.net](mailto:tstecker@eenews.net)

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