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INSIGHT

U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Civil Works: Primer and Resources

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Congress plays a role in the nation's water resource development through authorization and appropriations of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) projects and activities. USACE is a Department of Defense (DOD) agency that develops civil works projects principally to improve navigable channels, reduce flood and storm damage, and restore aquatic ecosystems. Congress also may authorize and fund USACE to assist certain nonfederal, publicly owned water-related facilities.

The Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works (ASACW) provides policy direction and supervision of USACE civil works. A military Chief of Engineers manages USACE's civil and military missions. USACE's 44 district offices work with nonfederal project sponsors.

Standard USACE project delivery consists of USACE leading the study, design, and construction of authorized projects. Nonfederal project sponsors typically share in study and construction costs, including providing real estate. Nonfederal sponsors generally perform operation and maintenance for flood risk reduction and ecosystem restoration projects. USACE typically performs operations and maintenance for navigation and some multipurpose projects, such as dams.

USACE projects typically require two separate congressional authorizations—one for studying feasibility and one for construction—and appropriations for both. This Insight summarizes the USACE authorization and funding processes and provides links to related resources.

Project and Programmatic Authorization

Most USACE projects start with congressional authorization to conduct a feasibility study of a water resource issue (see **Figure 1**). If a feasibility study is funded, USACE evaluates alternatives to address the issue and recommends one alternative for construction. The Chief of Engineers then signs a recommendation for project construction (i.e., the Chief's report) and transmits the completed study and the Chief's report to congressional authorizing committees, which consider whether to authorize project construction. If project features or estimated costs change significantly after authorization, additional congressional authorization may be necessary.

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Figure 1. Standard Process for USACE Projects

Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

Congress has granted USACE programmatic authorities—Continuing Authorities Programs (CAPs)—that enable USACE and nonfederal sponsors to undertake cost-shared projects of limited scope and cost without requiring project-specific congressional authorizations. Congress also has authorized USACE to provide environmental infrastructure assistance for certain publicly owned facilities (e.g., municipal water supply and wastewater collection projects), and to engage in technical assistance for certain activities, such as flood risk mitigation and watershed studies.

Resources on USACE Authorizations

- USACE, "Signed Chief Reports"
- CRS Report R47946, *Process for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Projects*
- CRS In Focus IF12635, *Continuing Authorities Programs (CAPs) of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers*
- CRS Report R47162, *Overview of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Environmental Infrastructure (EI) Assistance*

Water Resources Development Acts

Congress generally authorizes USACE studies, projects, and programs and makes changes to the agency's policies through omnibus authorization acts, typically titled Water Resources Development Acts

(WRDAs). WRDAs generally authorize new activities that are added to the pool of existing authorized activities. Numerous projects authorized for construction in previous WRDAs remain unfunded.

Authorization provisions in WRDAs can be project-specific, programmatic, or general directives. Most project-specific authorizations in WRDAs fall into three general categories: project studies, construction projects, and modifications to existing projects. WRDAs also have established deauthorization processes and/or have deauthorized individual projects.

To develop WRDAs, the authorizing committees for USACE—the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works—typically hold hearings to receive testimony from stakeholders, solicit input from Members (including, at times, Member requests for their WRDA priorities), and review reports transmitted by the Administration. For example, the ASACW annually transmits a report to USACE's congressional authorizing committees containing nonfederal submissions to USACE proposing that Congress authorize site-specific studies and modifications.

Since the 1980s, Congress generally has considered WRDAs biennially; the timing of enactment has varied. Congress enacted WRDA-type legislation in 2000, 2007, 2014, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022, and 2024. (In the 118th Congress, WRDA 2024 was Division A of P.L. 118-272, the Thomas R. Carper Water Resources Development Act of 2024.) After enactment, USACE often has developed and published implemental guidance for certain WRDA provisions.

Resources on WRDA Considerations

- CRS In Focus IF11322, *Water Resources Development Acts: Primer and Action in the 118th Congress*
- CRS Insight IN11118, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Section 7001 Report on Future Studies and Projects*

Appropriations

The majority of USACE's appropriations are used to perform work on geographically specific studies and congressionally authorized projects (e.g., study and construction of new and modified projects, and USACE operation and maintenance of navigation projects and multipurpose dams). Congress typically appropriates funds for USACE activities in annual Energy and Water Development appropriations acts (e.g., $8.7 billion in FY2024). For FY2025, Congress enacted funding for USACE activities as part of a full-year continuing appropriations act (commonly known as a continuing resolution).

USACE's annual appropriations process generally involves three major milestones: the President's budget request, congressional deliberation and enactment of appropriations, and Administration development of a USACE work plan allocating funds to specific studies and projects (**Figure 2**). In the 117th and 118th Congresses, Congress also considered congressionally directed funding for site-specific USACE projects (i.e., *community project funding/congressionally directed spending* [CPF/CDS]) in the appropriations process. The 119th Congress also has allowed Members to submit CPF/CDS requests.

Figure 2. Depiction of the Annual Appropriations Process for USACE

Source: CRS.

Congress has used supplemental appropriations to fund USACE emergency specific flood-related response and recovery activities (e.g., $1.5 billion in Division B, Title IV of P.L. 118-158) and to advance other purposes, such as general investments in infrastructure (e.g., $17.1 billion in Division J, Title III, of P.L. 117-58). For some supplemental appropriations, Congress has directed USACE to publish spend plans identifying funded studies and projects.

Resources on USACE Appropriations

- USACE, "Civil Works Budget and Performance"
- CRS Report R46320, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Annual Appropriations Process*
- CRS In Focus IF12648, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: FY2025 Appropriations*
- CRS In Focus IF13039, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: FY2026 Appropriations*
- CRS Report R48572, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Supplemental Appropriations*

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