



Updated March 26, 2026

# Water Resources Development Acts: Primer and Action in the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is an agency that develops water resource projects, among other civil and military missions. The primary purposes of USACE studies and projects historically have been (1) improving navigation, (2) reducing flood risk, and (3) restoring aquatic ecosystems. USACE projects may additionally support water supply storage, recreation, and hydropower, among other benefits. USACE typically conducts project planning and manages construction, and for navigation and multipurpose projects, it may be responsible for operation and maintenance. Congress also has authorized USACE to assist nonfederal public entities with their *environmental infrastructure* (EI; e.g., design and construction assistance for public drinking water and wastewater infrastructure) in designated communities, counties, and states.

Authorization is typically a precondition for USACE activities' eligibility for federal appropriations. Congress often, but not always, considers on a biennial schedule omnibus legislation to authorize USACE water resource studies and projects and to refine congressional policy direction. Congress commonly refers to such legislation as a *Water Resources Development Act* (WRDA) and distinguishes these bills by the year of their consideration and enactment (e.g., WRDA 2024).

The authorizing committees for USACE civil works are the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works (EPW). In the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress, each committee has held WRDA-related hearings and in early 2026 solicited Member input on priorities for a Water Resources Development Act of 2026 (WRDA 2026). In developing a WRDA, the committees generally review reports transmitted by USACE, the Administration, the Government Accountability Office, and others, and consider other policy developments. For WRDA 2026, this may include the Build Infrastructure, Not Paperwork (BINP) initiative and accompanying memoranda. In February 2026, the Assistant Secretary for the Army for Civil Works (ASACW) announced this initiative to change the way USACE conducts business and to more efficiently accomplish its primary missions. Congressional deliberations for WRDA 2026 may encompass improving the agency's efficiency in project delivery, priorities for the agency's work and resources, and the role of nonfederal entities in project delivery.

## USACE Activities and WRDAs

Through WRDAs and earlier legislation, Congress has established a general framework and guidelines for implementing USACE water resource projects and activities (e.g., setting standard federal and nonfederal cost

shares). Most USACE studies and project authorizations are geographically specific (e.g., a flood risk reduction project for a specific community along a river). WRDA provisions may authorize new work or amend existing authorizations. Historically, WRDA provisions have focused on USACE's water resource activities. On some occasions, provisions have addressed USACE's regulatory program or other agencies' water resources activities (e.g., Federal Emergency Management Agency's dam safety program).

Since 2000, WRDAs have been enacted as stand-alone bills (e.g., in 2000, 2007, and 2014) and as part of broader bills (e.g., in 2016, 2018, 2020, and 2022).

## Study and Project Authorizations

Most USACE projects require two types of congressional authorization. First is an authority to study the feasibility of the project. Second is, after a favorable feasibility report, authority to construct the project (and operate and maintain it, as applicable). Although most USACE authorizations do not expire, Congress has limited the duration of some WRDA provisions (e.g., a 10-year pilot program) and established processes for deauthorizing projects.

Authorization for a study, project, or other activity (e.g., research, pilot program) on its own is insufficient for USACE to proceed. Once authorized, USACE still must receive funding for that activity (e.g., Investigations account funding to initiate an authorized study). Congress provides appropriations for USACE through the annual Energy and Water Development appropriations process and, at times, through supplemental appropriations.

## Nonfederal Responsibilities and Roles

Although USACE projects authorized in WRDAs are federal projects, nonfederal sponsors generally are required to provide land and other real estate interests needed for a project and to share study and construction costs. For studies, Congress has set the standard cost share at 50% federal and 50% nonfederal. For construction, Congress has set standard cost shares for various USACE project purposes. For instance, Congress set the construction cost share for aquatic ecosystem restoration projects at a fixed 65% federal and 35% nonfederal, unless otherwise specified. Congress has determined that operation, maintenance, and rehabilitation of most flood control and aquatic ecosystem restoration projects are a 100% nonfederal responsibility.

## Congressional Considerations

As part of its development of WRDA 2026, the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress may consider various options as it assesses how to shape the future portfolio of USACE assets,

responsibilities, and processes, and its response to the ASACW's efforts to set priorities and alter agency practice.

### Delivery Efficiency and Asset Management

WRDA 2026 deliberations may include how to enhance the timeliness and constrain the cost of USACE projects. Congress may assess the ASACW's memoranda establishing priorities for the agency's human capital and discretionary resources and allowing exceptions for project labor agreements to control costs. If Congress decides to act, it may choose to codify and adopt the ASACW's efforts or to establish its own civil works priorities and guidance for limiting cost growth (e.g., it could alter the authority for determining the post-authorization maximum cost of projects).

According to the ASACW, USACE has \$45 billion in appropriated, unexpended funds. At a WRDA 2026 hearing on February 24, 2025, the ASACW testified that the Administration needed to "be better at executing the funding" and that a portion of these funds are "stranded." The ASACW indicated that Congress could reexamine if these appropriations could be applied "somewhere else more efficiently," and that \$15 billion of these funds are from more than six years ago. According to the Treasury, at the end of FY2025, USACE had unexpended balances of \$36.6 billion in its Construction account and \$6.9 billion in its Operation and Maintenance account. Congress may pursue additional information on the factors contributing to these balances, such as the role of statutory limitations and congressional direction, nonfederal sponsors limitations, and USACE and Administration policies.

Congress may assess whether to alter USACE's approach to investing in its aging infrastructure, including for dam safety and hydropower improvements. Congress may evaluate how the agency's management of navigation systems and dredging contracts has implications for national and local economies, transport efficiency, and the movement of energy products. This could include the Administration's distribution of \$1.5 billion in additional funds for navigation operation and maintenance as part of FY2026 appropriations (P.L. 119-74). Congress may evaluate how agency staffing levels, federal environmental statute compliance, and USACE real estate requirements influence the delivery and operations of USACE projects. For example, USACE dredging activities are required to comply with various resource protection statutes that may shape when and how the agency can dredge navigation channels.

### USACE Backlogged Work and Nonfederal Roles

A challenge for federal policymakers is whether—and, if so, how—to advance "backlogged" USACE authorized studies and projects that either have not received federal funds to complete the study or initiate construction or have other issues impeding their progress. One option may be expanding authorized opportunities for greater nonfederal roles in development, construction, and financing. Congress previously approved authorities that allow interested nonfederal entities to lead work on studies and projects that typically would be performed by USACE. Under these authorities, nonfederal sponsors have completed multiple

studies and projects, and have advanced a limited number of projects using private-public partnerships. The 119<sup>th</sup> Congress may evaluate nonfederal sponsors' experiences of using these authorities and decide whether to make adjustments to improve how the authorities are implemented.

Other potential approaches to reduce the backlog of USACE work include deauthorizing unconstructed projects (a process the ASACW initiated in February 2026) and increasing or repurposing prior federal funding for USACE infrastructure. The 119<sup>th</sup> Congress also may be interested in evaluating USACE's operation of more than 2,700 recreation sites at the agency's water resources projects (e.g., camping and reservoir access sites). Congress may assess the benefits and drawbacks of USACE or nonfederal entities operating these sites and the agency's authorities for nonfederal recreation management opportunities, in light of staffing- and contract-related closures of some USACE-operated sites in 2025.

### Implementation Guidance and Regulations

In hearings and enacted WRDA provisions, Congress has sought timelier WRDA implementation and development of post-enactment WRDA implementation guidance. The content and pace of USACE rulemakings also may be a WRDA 2026 consideration. Rules that have been in development by recent Administrations include procedures for permissions to alter USACE public works, practices for determining nonfederal sponsors' ability to pay, and the agency's natural disaster response activities.

### Work Priorities

In the context of the BINP initiative's efforts to focus the agency on its primary missions, the 119<sup>th</sup> Congress may face decisions on how to proceed with EI assistance and USACE support for water supply, water conservation, and drought resiliency through its projects, among other things. Similarly, Congress may assess implementation of USACE's initial efforts at providing credit assistance for nonfederal water resource projects through its Corps Water Infrastructure Financing Program. Congress also may reevaluate the agency's role in nonfederal lending, as is proposed in various bills (e.g., H.R. 3035, H.R. 6229, and S. 1760 would expand eligibility for credit assistance).

### Additional Resources

For more on WRDA topics, see CRS Insight IN11810, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Civil Works: Primer and Resources*; CRS Report R47946, *Process for U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) Projects*; CRS Insight IN12021, *Corps Water Infrastructure Financing Program (CWIFP)*; CRS Report R48322, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Civil Works: FAQs on Organization and Efficiency Reviews*; and CRS Report R47162, *Overview of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Environmental Infrastructure (EI) Assistance*.

---

**Nicole T. Carter**, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy  
**Anna E. Normand**, Specialist in Natural Resources Policy

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.