

Praise for Senate infrastructure bill; House's forthcoming

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(Left to right) Senate Environment and Public Works Committee ranking member Tom Carper (D-Del.) and Chairman John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) during a hearing on water resources legislation yesterday. Environment and Public Works Committee

Senators on the Environment and Public Works Committee yesterday cheered the release of bipartisan water infrastructure legislation.

"America's Water Infrastructure Act," unveiled yesterday, includes multiple provisions aimed at revamping the way water projects are authorized.

That includes requiring the Army Corps of Engineers headquarters and districts to provide Congress with a work plan and four-year projected budget on an annual basis, which senators said would lead to the authorization of more projects. Districts would be required to take local input into account in drafting their budgets.

EPW Chairman John Barrasso (R-Wyo.) called the requirement "an addition to the benefit-cost-ratio framework" the corps and Office of Management and Budget currently use to make recommendations to Congress about which projects to authorize.

"The addition will give local stakeholders a greater role in prioritizing Army Corps projects," he said. "Under this new provision, more projects are likely to be built in small, rural and inland states."

Ranking member Tom Carper (D-Del.) agreed. "Hopefully this participation will allow for a more transparent and long-term look at the corps' activities and serves to build a better groundswell of support for increased appropriations for the agency's initiatives," he said.

Barrasso focused many of his comments on how the bill would increase water storage nationwide. It would create a board of appeals for water storage projects, which Barrasso said would "facilitate the permitting of additional reservoirs."

"Expanding water storage will give our farmers, ranchers and communities a reliable supply of water in order to keep their livestock and their crops healthy," he said. "More water storage also provides an economic incentive for new businesses to grow and create jobs throughout the nation."

Pat Riley, an advisory committee member for the Family Farm Alliance, said he particularly appreciated that provision in the bill.

"Usually when these projects are blocked, we have already spent millions of dollars of state and private money to get to that stage, so it's like running into a roadblock when the Army Corps puts their foot down," he said. The appeals board, he continued, "allows us to have people in the room who understand what we are talking about."

Reservoirs, sediment, flood control

The legislation would also direct the Bureau of Reclamation and the Army Corps to develop sediment management plans for federal reservoirs.

Riley told senators that "siltation is a chronic problem throughout the West" and thanked them for including the provision. "Some of the reservoirs I work with are 50 percent full of silt right now," he said.

Carper praised the bill for its requirement that the corps give greater weight to "green" infrastructure in feasibility studies for man-made flood control programs.

He said he was "particularly proud" of the provision because it "will support the selection of natural infrastructure alternatives as a practicable alternative where the development of gray — or more traditional — infrastructure alone may not work."

Tony Pratt, president of the American Shore and Beach Preservation Association, agreed.

"In the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, we were trying to contain the forces of nature from impacting the coast" by building sea walls and bulkheads, he said. "But if you stop and think what attracts so

many people to the coast, it's the beaches, it's the dunes, it's the wetlands. They can perform [flood control] very well."

Outside support

Many interests outside the EPW Committee have already expressed their support for the legislation.

The Senate Western Caucus said the bill "secures Western priorities," like expanding water storage and assisting rural communities in complying with the Safe Drinking Water Act.

Caucus Chairman Steve Daines (R-Mont.) said the bill is "an important first step for Montana families, farmers, ranchers, the Blackfoot Tribe and Western states."

The Nature Conservancy also issued a statement in support. Senior Water Policy Adviser Jimmy Hague said the bill includes policies and projects "that will advance the restoration of critical ecosystems and will encourage the use of nature in solving our country's water resources challenges."

In particular, the group applauded the bill's inclusion of habitat restoration projects in the Lower Mississippi River Basin.

Madeleine Foote, the League of Conservation Voters' legislative representative, noted the bill does not include any policies to streamline the National Environmental Policy Act or other permitting processes targeted by the Trump administration.

Rather, she said, the bill focuses "on steps such as water efficiency and nature-based solutions that lead toward a smarter, more sustainable future."

Outlook

An aide for House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Bill Shuster (R-Pa.) said the committee was looking to release its own water resources legislation.