

Water projects on Congress' to-do list; 3 Arkansas lawmakers emphasize bill's importance

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by [Alex Thomas](#)



From left, U.S. Rep. Bruce Westerman, U.S. Sen. John Boozman and U.S. Rep. Rick Crawford, all R-Ark., are shown in these undated file photos.

WASHINGTON — U.S. Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark., is aware the Water Resources Development Act is not a hot topic on Capitol Hill.

The water infrastructure measure does not receive as much attention as other matters debated in the Senate and House of Representatives, such as appropriations or ideas addressing immigration and border security.

“It’s not glamorous,” said Boozman, of Rogers. “It’s not something that you really take notice of.”

It is, however, an important item on Congress’ annual to-do list. The push to pass this bill will escalate in the coming months as pressure builds for Congress to address its legislative priorities before year’s end.

The Water Resources Development Act authorizes U.S. Army Corps of Engineer projects, water resources and ecosystem research, and continued support for ongoing related work. Jesse Richardson, a West Virginia University College of Law professor with expertise in land use and sustainability, noted a majority of these projects are first proposed at the local level.

“You think about rivers and you think about navigation. This also covers flood protections, stormwater protections, everything that covers water,” Richardson told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette.

“Water is really vital to our economy not only in the navigation sense, but flooding is the most costly natural disaster,” Richardson said. “We lose a lot of money and a lot of human lives. These projects are really important.”

The Senate and House of Representatives have typically passed final versions of this bill without controversy and with overwhelming bipartisan support.

President Joe Biden signed the most recent version of the law in December 2022 as part of a broader legislative effort.

“It is a true necessity,” Boozman said. “It is something we have to continue to invest in.”

The full House passed its version of the Water Resources Development Act last Monday with a 359-13 vote. All four Arkansas members supported the legislation.

Reps. Rick Crawford and Bruce Westerman, both R-Ark., are members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, which has jurisdiction over transportation-related issues and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The committee agreed to advance the legislation to the full House during a June 26 markup.

As for Congress’ upper chamber, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee unanimously agreed in May to send its measure to the full Senate. Boozman serves on the committee.

During separate conversations with the Democrat-Gazette, Boozman, Crawford and Westerman emphasized the economic significance of the Water Resources Development Act, noting the bill’s importance in protecting Arkansas’ waterways and transporting goods by utilizing inland ports.

“The Arkansas River is a very important navigable waterway,” said Westerman, of Hot Springs. “It’s one of the best-kept secrets in the state. It’s kind of out of sight, out of mind, but there’s a tremendous amount of freight that moves up and down the river that has a very important economic impact on the state.”

An important section of the House bill from Crawford’s perspective involves funding for improving navigation in small waterways and inland harbors. The House agreed to increase spending on such projects from \$10 million to \$12.5 million.

MISSISSIPPI COUNTY PROJECT

Crawford said the additional \$2.5 million is crucial for improving navigation and expanding ports like Osceola Harbor. The current Mississippi County port has reached capacity already with Hybar Steel set to open a new steel mill within two years.

“It’s important that that expansion takes place,” the Jonesboro congressman said.

Crawford helps lead the bipartisan Congressional Steel Caucus, which consists of lawmakers representing districts where the steel industry maintains a strong presence. Nucor, U.S. Steel and Big River Steel have operations in Mississippi County, and the Mississippi River serves as a crucial waterway for transporting items.

“There are a lot of people in the state of Arkansas that don’t realize that the 1st District is the largest steel-producing district in the nation, and Mississippi County is the center of it,” Crawford said. “It’s an economic juggernaut.”

The Senate version includes language authorizing modifications to Osceola Harbor for navigational purposes.

“We’re blessed,” Boozman said concerning Arkansas’ role in the steel industry. “That simply would not exist without the (Mississippi River) being able to make it such that they can ship it in such a way using the river.”

The Senate and House measures call for creating a levee owners advisory board responsible for making recommendations concerning levee system reliability and safety. The body would have a membership representing various regions of the country.

“That basically gives levee owners an actual seat at the table as we engage with the Army Corps of Engineers,” Crawford said. “Folks along those rivers (and) businesses that rely on those inland waterways and the ports associated with them understand how important that is, as well as the levee operators that protect us by maintaining those levees.”

Rob Rash, CEO and chief engineer of the St. Francis Levee District, applauded the inclusion of the board's creation in both legislative proposals. The district consists of 411 miles of total levee in northeast Arkansas. Rash noted the system protects more than 2 million acres of farmland.

“It would at least give local people more of a voice on the front end,” he told the Democrat-Gazette. “The local people have been involved in the construction and maintenance of these levees more than 150 years ago in our area, and that voice still needs to be there.”

RECREATION

Westerman highlighted language phasing in a new fee retention structure at certain outdoor recreation sites. The change would allow the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to keep more recreation fees collected at its sites, with this money going toward operation and maintenance costs.

Westerman described the change as “the first step in getting more opportunities to do more recreation on Arkansas lakes.” The section was part of a broader bill — the LAKES Act — pushing public-private partnerships involving the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Westerman introduced the measure in Congress' lower chamber, with Crawford and Arkansas' other House members — Republicans French Hill of Little Rock and Steve Womack of Rogers — backing the bipartisan legislation. Boozman is a co-sponsor of the Senate companion bill.

“There are more recreation visitors to Corps of Engineer facilities than Park Service, Forest Service and Fish and Wildlife combined,” Westerman said. “A lot of it's boating. A lot of people visit the lakes, fish, camp and recreate along the water.”

Crawford and Westerman were unsuccessful in efforts to change the bill during the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's markup. A Crawford-led amendment would have removed language extending authorization for the

national levee safety initiative from September 2028 to September 2033. The congressman expressed concerns about granting an extension without guaranteeing proper oversight.

“You take the wins that you can, and sometimes, you don’t get everything you want,” he said last week.

Westerman had two amendments regarding prevailing wage rates for services; current federal law requires workers to receive a prevailing wage on federal service contracts exceeding \$2,500 and construction contracts of more than \$2,000.

“Think about a backhoe,” Westerman said. “If you want to change the tires on a backhoe, instead of calling the tire shop and changing the tires on the backhoe, you have to write a bid document and put it out for competitive bids. You’ll end up spending \$15,000 just to change tires on a backhoe for absolutely no reason except for this antiquated law.”

Crawford and Westerman promised these matters would be part of discussions regarding future versions of the Water Resources Development Act.

It is not clear when the Senate will consider its version or the House bill, but Congress has limited time to pass a final measure. The House started its monthlong August recess following votes last Thursday, and the Senate will begin its break after finishing legislative business this week.

Both chambers are not scheduled to be in session in October, as Congress will take another monthlong break ahead of the Nov. 5 election. The Senate and House will return to Capitol Hill on Nov. 12 for five weeks of legislative business.

“It’s just a matter of finding floor time,” Boozman said.

One possibility is passing the Water Resources Development Act during the post-election lame-duck session. Congress may not even consider the matter on its own; lawmakers in December 2022 inserted the most recent version of this

legislation in the National Defense Authorization Act, Congress' annual bill authorizing military-related spending.

Boozman recognized Congress will need to consider all 12 appropriations bills at some point, acknowledging the likelihood the legislative body will need to pass a short-term continuing resolution in September to fund the government into the new fiscal year, which starts Oct. 1.

“We’ll get a lot of stuff done in the lame-duck, and I think that’s probably when this will happen,” the senator said concerning the water infrastructure measure. “It will probably be combined with some other bills that are also important.”

This story has been updated. It was originally published at 12:09 p.m. under the headline "Arkansas lawmakers stress passing water projects bill with limited time in congressional schedule."

