

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Congress will begin legislative business for the year when lawmakers return to Capitol Hill this week, but members have already started work surrounding one **priority** of this congressional session.

Members of the Senate and House of Representatives held their first hearings on the next version of the **Water Resources Development Act** toward the end of last year, eyeing the passage of a new law before the end of 2024.

Congress passes the **Water Resources Development Act** every two years, authorizing U.S. Army Corps of Engineers **projects**, **water** resource research and additional financial assistance. Legislators inserted the most recent version of this comprehensive legislation in the National Defense Authorization Act -- Congress' annual **bill** authorizing military-related spending -- in December 2022, which received robust bipartisan support.

"It's kind of like a plan going forward for the Corps of Engineers and **water** infrastructure in the United States," said Jesse Richardson, a West Virginia University College of Law professor who studies laws pertaining to land use, **water** and agriculture.

"Everybody agrees it's a key piece of legislation that needs to move forward."

Members of Arkansas' congressional delegation have a keen interest in the next **bill**, in part because of their committee responsibilities. Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark., of Rogers serves on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Fellow Republicans Reps. Rick Crawford of Jonesboro and Bruce Westerman of Hot Springs are members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Westerman is also part of the body's **Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee**. He served as the subcommittee's top Republican before taking a leadership role with the House Natural Resources Committee.

During separate interviews with the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Boozman and Westerman emphasized the law's impact related to the Army Corps of Engineers' work improving navigable waterways and areas of commerce.

"All of our ports fall under WRDA," Westerman said. "I've visited the Port of Los Angeles and several major ports across the country. Every county in Arkansas is affected by those ports in California."

"These things aren't glamorous, but it's things like this that are truly the underpinning of our economy. Because of that, it's important we get it done in a timely fashion," Boozman said.

Past versions of the **Water Resources Development Act** have included **projects** to increase the depth and protect navigation along the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation System, a 445-mile channel connecting Tulsa and the junction of the Mississippi and White rivers.

The river system serves as a major economic network; vessels in 2022 moved \$3.1 billion worth of commodities through the system.

"We've been successful in helping produce some good WRDAs in the past," Westerman said.

Boozman said the **Water Resources Development Act** is an important tool in protecting waterways from extreme weather events.

"In one part of the year, we'll have significant flooding, and then maybe in the summer you'll have hundred-year droughts," he said. "That's all difficult to manage, but it has to be managed."

The **Water Resources Development Act** is just one of Congress' cyclic measures needing passage before year's end.

Both chambers need to approve reauthorization for the Federal Aviation Administration by March 8 and a new farm **bill** before Sept. 30.

Lawmakers approved the most recent versions of both bills in 2018.

"As the Corps of Engineers finishes a series of **projects** and begins to embark on another series, it's important that we assess these past **projects** and see how they've gone and look at what we need to do to improve infrastructure in the future," Richardson said.

"With **water**, things change so quickly that every five years wouldn't cut it. It's such a dynamic process with drought, increasing **water** needs and how important **water** infrastructure is, every two years seems like a more appropriate cycle."

The House **Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee** will hold a members day hearing Thursday, providing House members with an opportunity to voice support for including **projects** in the final **bill**.

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