

# Signals



Work continues in the cofferdam at the Chickamauga Lock Replacement Project in December 2017. The Water Resources Development Act of 2018 includes a change report for the Tennessee River project that ensures continued construction after original funding has been spent. The earliest estimated completion date for the \$760 million lock is 2024.

Courtesy U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

## Congress backs towing industry, passes new WRDA with no user fees

Several Trump administration proposals opposed by inland towing interests were dropped from the waterway resources bill passed by Congress and signed by the president in late October, showing the strength that the industry has on Capitol Hill, according to towing organization leaders.

The Water Resources Develop-

ment Act (WRDA) of 2018 did not include several contentious measures, among them authorization language for lockage fees and tolls. Mike Toohey, president and chief executive officer of the Waterways Council Inc., said Congress appreciates the value of the inland river system more than the administration does.

“Congress wasn’t willing to make those changes that the Trump administration wanted,” he said. “They recognized what it would do for the waterways — tolls of that level would destroy the economic viability of shipping on the waterways.”

The inland system includes 12,000 miles of commercially

navigable waterways and 240 locks, with 600 million tons of freight carried annually.

Trump unveiled a proposal last March that called for privatizing the inland waterways system by eliminating the role of the federal government to construct and maintain infrastructure, instead shifting the authority to private, non-federal agencies. Trump planned to reduce the federal contribution for the cost of capital projects from 50 percent to 20 percent, and he also wanted \$1 billion in new user fees that would be paid by commercial operators.

Toohy said he was unsure

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whether the White House would make an attempt to bring back a proposal for user fees in 2019. "We don't know, but it was very strongly rejected" by this Congress, he said.

By passing a WRDA in 2018, momentum was maintained for the construction of waterways projects. This is the third WRDA in a row to be passed by Congress, following successful bills in 2014 and 2016.

"Congress ... kept the WRDA bill on a two-year cycle, which is crucial to maintaining infrastructure, and making sure there are no disruptions in the project authorizations that get us to the point

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where we are moving ahead on new construction,” said Craig Montesano, vice president of legislative affairs for the American Waterways Operators. “Right off the bat, that is a huge plus.”

The bill provided increased funding for projects already under construction, including replacement of the Chickamauga Lock on the Tennessee River and the deepening of Savannah Harbor in Georgia. A change report was included for the Chickamauga Lock, allowing construction to continue once the project has reached its authorized amount. A project to deepen and widen commercial shipping

channels in Virginia’s Norfolk Harbor also was approved.

Of notable importance to Great Lakes shipping interests was a \$922 million authorization for a new 1,200-foot-long lock at the Soo Locks complex at Sault St. Marie, Mich. Currently, the Poe Lock is the only one that can handle the largest vessels on the lakes, carrying 90 percent of all cargo passing through Soo. Subsequently, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers announced in November that the Soo Locks project will receive \$32.3 million as part of the Corps’ 2019 work plan.

During the WRDA process, industry leaders had confidence

that U.S. senators and representatives would support the current formula for construction, maintenance and operation of the inland waterways, despite Trump’s attempts to privatize the system and impose user fees.


“We went into this Congress with the notion that, yes, the president would probably present some sort of plan on infrastructure, and while we didn’t know how (the proposal) would be received, we were operating under the assumption that there would be a WRDA bill one way or another,” Montesano said.

*David A. Tyler*

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