

Waterways Journal

EDITORIAL

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Stars Align For WRDA

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BY WATERWAYS JOURNAL

At the end of an eventful and disruptive year, Jupiter and Saturn aligned for their first conjunction observable from Earth in 800 years, forming a “Christmas star.” In Washington, D.C., too, the “stars” aligned, as both houses of Congress passed the Water Resources Development Act by large margins (359 yeas to 53 nays in the House, 92 to 6 in the Senate). It was passed as part of an omnibus appropriations bill that also included \$900 billion in COVID-19 relief measures. The funding package is headed to the White House for the president’s signature.

Both the inland waterways and ports have reason to celebrate the bill. The package included the top priority of the Waterways Council Inc. to adjust the cost-share for construction and major rehabilitation of inland waterways projects from 50 percent Inland Waterways Trust Fund (IWTF) / 50 percent general revenues to 35 percent IWTF/65 percent general revenues for Fiscal Year (FY) 2021 through FY 2031. Projects whose construction starts between FY2021 and FY2031 will operate under the adjusted 35/65 cost-share for the duration of their lives. And the bill included no new fees or taxes on commercial operators.

The WRDA bill includes a 902 cost-limit increase for Kentucky Lock and a Chief’s Report authorization for the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway–Brazos River Floodgates and Colorado locks. The cost-limit increase allows work on Kentucky Lock to continue to completion, and the Chief’s Report allows construction of new sector gates and channel widening to provide for more safe and efficient navigation.

The bill includes money for the Corps that allows funding of Chickamauga Lock to completion and efficient funding for Kentucky Lock. The FY21 funding measure provides for nine new study starts and seven total new construction starts across the Corps' Civil Works mission. For the first time since 2004, one of the new starts must be for inland waterways lock and dam modernization. The Corps' FY21 Work Plan, typically released 60 days after enactment of the appropriations bill, will detail which project will be selected for the new start.

The American Association of Port Authorities celebrated the bill, which includes spend-down provisions for the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund. AAPA President and CEO Christopher Connor said, "AAPA and its U.S. member ports are elated that Congress included WRDA in the year-end funding bill. This historic, landmark legislation has been at the forefront of AAPA's advocacy efforts for decades to improve America's economy, infrastructure and competitiveness."

Congress agreed to allow spending down the approximately \$9.3 billion balance in the HMTF, starting at \$500 million in the first year after passage, to address the significant backlog in federal navigation maintenance work throughout the country. After that, WRDA 2020 provides an additional \$100 million a year in spending until it reaches \$1 billion in year five.

Among the bill's many positive effects, it will provide enough work to keep the nation's dredging fleet humming at full- or near-full employment for many, many years, and it provides welcome incentives for more investment in the dredging fleet.

It may take months for the COVID-19 vaccine to be distributed and to reach enough Americans to justify lifting all the lockdowns and movement restrictions. But as those are eased, and the economy recovers and begins to show the effects of pent-up demand for goods and services, the WRDA has ensured that our ports and inland waterways will be better able to keep up with expanding needs.

When future generations look back on the "plague year" of 2020, we hope they will remember that it was also the year that the country began to turn the corner on port and waterways infrastructure funding.