

WCI continues to press for WRDA progress



The sun sets as work continues at Cannelton Locks and Dam on the Ohio River in Cannelton, Ind.

After very little was accomplished in the first session of the 118th Congress, the “to do” list for this session, which resumed in early January, is long and full of critical issues that will influence the nation far into the future.

Among them is passing Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations, that, at press time, was still not resolved, with grappling over other issues impacting the entire legislation. This would provide essential funding for inland waterways lock and dam construction in the Energy & Water Development appropriations bill.

When the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) passed in 2021, it included \$2.5 billion for inland waterways, with seven inland construction and major rehabilitation projects “funded to completion.” However, due to inflation, supply chain delays, and workforce challenges, those projects now require millions in additional funds to complete construction and become operational.

In fact, only about \$361 billion of the IIJA law’s \$1.1 trillion in spending has been awarded to specific projects, and only a fraction has gone to projects that have been completed. According to reports (*E&E News*), the Biden administration wants to increase the number of shovels in the ground for infrastructure law-related projects in 2024, with an aim of getting projects out the door and contracts in place prior to next January.

And while the IIJA relates to spending, the

Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) 2024—the biennial water resource legislative vehicle—offers an opportunity to make important policy changes related to waterways infrastructure.

Consistent with Congressional intent, WCI requests that all inland waterways construction and major rehabilitation projects funded by IIJA remain at federal cost (rather than the cost-share formula in place for regular-order construction and major rehabilitation projects). This is consistent with IIJA’s intent – to fully fund inland waterways construction projects at 100% federal cost to achieve an accelerated return on investment. Ensuring the cost of these projects remains 100% federally funded will allow the nation to realize economic return more quickly, reduce the supply chain’s environmental footprint, and address uncertainty in global agriculture and energy markets.

While the inland waterways network facilitates the transport of one-third of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product, the system relies on lock and dam infrastructure constructed in the early 20th century. This infrastructure has far exceeded its original 50-year design life. Deterioration has made these projects more susceptible to failures resulting in unscheduled closures or stoppages that increase congestion and the cost of transporting waterborne commodities, compounding recent effects of inflation on consumers.

Necessary capital improvements to the

inland waterways transportation system are cost-shared through a 29-cent-per-gallon fuel tax imposed on commercial users of the system which are deposited into the Inland Waterways Trust Fund (IWTF) to help with recapitalization of the system. The current cost-share requirement is 35% from the IWTF, with the remaining 65% from General Treasury funds, both appropriated to the Corps of Engineers in an Energy and Water Development appropriations bill. In providing IIJA funds to the Corps of Engineers, Congress waived the cost-share requirement for inland waterways construction and major rehabilitation projects, recognizing the importance of accelerating the pace to complete projects to strengthen America’s supply chain and stay competitive in global markets, further highlighted by Russia’s war on Ukraine.

Unless the cost-share for these seven projects is modified in WRDA 2024, planned capital improvements across the antiquated inland waterways transportation system will be jeopardized and needlessly delayed, further hamstringing the economic and environmental benefits these projects provide.

In the Senate, WCI gained the support of 18 senators submitting our WRDA 2024 request to the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee. In the House, the Transportation & Infrastructure Committee accepted WRDA 2024 requests from House Members through its online portal that closed mid-January. Those results are still to be determined as at the time of this writing.



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