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Aiming to complete one of their top legislative priorities before the end of this session of Congress, lawmakers from both the House and the Senate introduced bipartisan bills to reauthorize the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), which should be passed every two years. The last two WRDA reauthorizations passed in 2016 and 2014. However, prior to 2014, there had been a seven-year gap since the act was last reauthorized in 2007.

On May 9, 2018, Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman John Barrasso (R-WY) introduced a version of the bill in the Senate, entitled “America’s Public Water Infrastructure Act of 2018” (S. 2800). Just over a week later, on May 18, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster (R-PA-9) introduced a related bill in the House named the “Water Resources Development Act of 2018” (H.R. 8). The legislation provides for improvements to the nation’s ports, dams, flood protection, ecosystem restoration, and other water infrastructure administered by the Army Corps of Engineers. Both chambers have expressed strong commitment to pass a 2018 WRDA reauthorization on schedule.

While President Donald Trump’s infrastructure proposal is unlikely to pass before the end of the calendar year, some policymakers see WRDA as a component of the proposal in some respect, and suggest its reauthorization signals the start of a new long-term infrastructure investment plan. Others argue that these two efforts are unrelated because WRDA requires biennial congressional reauthorization regardless and, unlike the President’s proposal, neither the House nor Senate WRDA reauthorization bills contain provisions to reform the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

In addition to supporting water resource infrastructure projects, both the House and Senate bills would direct the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) to study the current organizational structure of the Army Corps of Engineers’ Civil Works division, with the House bill language specifically asking NAS to conduct a study on the potential effects of transferring the functions of civil works from the Department of Defense to a new or existing agency or subagency of the federal government.

The Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure each approved their chamber’s version of the WRDA reauthorization on May 22 and May 23, respectively. Ultimately, members of Congress in both chambers must reconcile the versions proposed by each chamber and pass a final WRDA reauthorization bill before the end of the session.

Sources: Library of Congress; U.S. House, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure; U.S. Senate, Committee on Environment and Public Works.
