
WRDA: WHY AUTHORIZATION ALONE IS NOT ENOUGH

WRDA Authorization Is Only Step One

WRDA authorization is an important milestone, but it is only step one in a two-step process. In most cases, Congress must still provide appropriations before the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers can move forward with an authorized study, project, or activity. Authorization establishes legal authority. Appropriations provide the funding needed to act on that authority.

That distinction matters because authorization and appropriations are separate Congressional actions, handled through different processes and different committees. A study or project may be authorized in a Water Resources Development Act, but that does not mean funding will follow automatically or on a timeline that allows the work to proceed efficiently.

This is where the disconnect becomes significant. Congress has authorized far more Corps studies and projects than it funds through annual appropriations. As a result, there is a substantial backlog of authorized but unfunded, or only partially funded, work. Even where a project is justified, supported, and authorized, it may still wait years for appropriations to move forward.

For non-federal sponsors and communities, that gap has real consequences. Reaching authorization often requires years of coordination, technical analysis, public support, and financial commitment. WRDA authorization confirms federal interest and allows the Corps to proceed in law, but authorization alone does not ensure that funding will be provided to move the work ahead.

The numbers tell the story

With nearly \$100 billion in authorized work competing for roughly \$2-3 billion in annual funding for new construction starts, most authorized projects will wait years for funding. Some may never receive appropriations at all.

This means:

- Authorization does not guarantee funding.
- Authorization does not guarantee a project will ever be built.
- Even high-priority, shovel-ready projects face years of uncertainty.
- Hundreds of communities are in the same position, competing for limited dollars.

That is why **appropriations are step two**. To realize the benefits of WRDA authorizations, Congress must also provide funding through the annual Energy and Water Development appropriations process.

The Cost of Waiting for Appropriations

For non-federal sponsors who have already committed local cost-share dollars, delays between authorization and appropriation create serious problems:

- **Local commitments continue regardless of federal action.** Bonds must be repaid. Real estate must be maintained. Public expectations must be managed. The local cost-share obligation doesn't go away just because federal funding hasn't arrived.
- **Costs escalate while projects wait.** What was authorized as a \$50 million project may cost \$60-70 million –or even more-- by the time funding arrives, if it ever arrives at all. Inflation, labor costs, and materials pricing don't stop increasing while projects wait for appropriations.
- **Public trust erodes.** Elected officials who championed projects and communities that voted to tax themselves lose faith in the federal partnership when authorized projects fail to advance year after year.
- **Planning becomes nearly impossible.** Sponsors cannot commit to construction timelines, coordinate with state agencies, or finalize contracts without knowing if or when federal appropriations will arrive.
- **Section 902 cost limits get triggered.** When projects wait years for funding, inflation-driven cost increases can push total project costs above authorized limits, requiring new authorization before work can proceed and creating additional delay.

Incremental Funding Extends Timelines and Compounds Costs.

Even when appropriations begin, most projects don't receive full funding to completion in a single year. Construction funding is typically spread across multiple fiscal years in increments.

This creates a compounding problem:

- Construction timelines stretch from, say, 3-5 years to 7-10 years-- or even longer.
- Mobilization and demobilization costs multiply as contractors are forced to start and stop work.
- Inflation continues affecting future-year work packages.
- Total project costs grow beyond initial estimates, even without scope changes.

Example timeline illustrating impacts of project delays:

- 2024: Project is authorized through WRDA (at an authorized cost of \$100 million).
- 2025-2026: No construction appropriations provided (so project waits).
- 2027: \$15 million appropriated (design finalization, early site work).

- 2028: \$20 million appropriated (Phase 1 construction begins).
- 2029: No new funding (work pauses, costs escalate).
- 2030: \$25 million appropriated (Phase 2 construction).
- 2031-2033: Remaining construction funding provided incrementally for the project.

By 2033, a project authorized at \$100 million in 2024 may end up costing \$130-140 million due to inflation and extended timelines. The non-federal sponsor's cost-share obligation has grown proportionally, and the project has taken nearly a decade to go from authorization to completion. This example timeline presents an optimistic scenario, as most projects wait far longer, or forever, to get funded and completed.

Different Committees, Different Engagement, Different Requests

Appropriations for Corps Civil Works projects are handled by completely different committees than WRDA authorization:

Appropriations Committees:

- House Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development
- Senate Appropriations Committee, Subcommittee on Energy and Water Development

Authorizing Committees:

- House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, Subcommittee on Water Resources & Environment.
- Senate Environment & Public Works Committee, Subcommittee on Fisheries, Water, & Wildlife.

PERSPECTIVES BETWEEN AUTHORIZING AND APPROPRIATING COMMITTEES	
Authorization (WRDA)	Appropriations (Energy & Water Bill)
Two-year cycle.	Annual cycle.
"Please authorize this project."	"Please fund this authorized project at \$X million in FY202X."
Emphasize need, justification, worthiness.	Emphasize readiness, urgency, return on investment (project cost-benefit ratios).
Show project is sound and has local support.	Show the project is shovel-ready and why it should compete successfully for construction funds.
Provide: project purpose, benefits, technical soundness.	Provide: authorization status, local cost-share committed, specific funding needs, what funding will accomplish.

What Effective Appropriations Engagement Requires.

Because appropriations occur annually and involve different committees, sponsors should begin building support for appropriations as early as possible, ideally alongside or soon after authorization.

Key Advocacy Actions that Need to be Taken with Congress

- Establishing contact with appropriations committee and subcommittee staff.
- Explaining the project, its benefits, and community support.
- Providing regular updates on project status and readiness.
- Coordinating with Congressional delegations on annual appropriations requests.
- Demonstrating that local cost-share is committed and available.
- Explaining what specific funding amounts would support in a given fiscal year.
- Showing why the project should be prioritized among other authorized projects competing for limited funds.

This is Ongoing, Annual Work, Not a One-Time Effort.

Sustained engagement in the appropriations process is often essential to translating WRDA authorization into on-the-ground progress.

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