



U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Civil Works: Primer and Resources

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Congress plays a role in the nation's [water resource development](#) through authorization and appropriations of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) projects and activities. USACE is a Department of Defense agency that develops civil works projects principally to improve navigable channels, reduce flood and storm damage, and restore aquatic ecosystems.

The Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works (ASACW) provides policy direction and supervision of USACE civil works. A military Chief of Engineers manages USACE's civil and military missions. USACE's 38 [district offices](#) work with nonfederal project sponsors to develop water resource projects.

Standard [USACE project delivery](#) consists of USACE leading the study, design, and construction of authorized projects. Nonfederal project sponsors typically share in [study](#) and [construction](#) costs, including providing real estate and generally performing [operation and maintenance](#) (O&M) for flood risk reduction and ecosystem restoration projects. USACE typically performs O&M for navigation and some multipurpose projects, such as dams. USACE [operates](#) more than 700 dams and [maintains](#) more than 900 coastal, Great Lakes, and inland harbors, as well as 12,000 miles of inland waterways.

USACE projects typically require two separate congressional authorizations—one for studying feasibility and one for construction—and appropriations for both. This Insight summarizes the USACE authorization and funding processes and provides links to related resources.

Project and Programmatic Authorization

Project Authorization. Most USACE projects start with congressional authorization to conduct a feasibility study of a water resource issue. If funded, the feasibility study evaluates alternatives to address the issue and recommends one alternative for construction. The Chief of Engineers then signs a recommendation for project construction (i.e., the [Chief's report](#)) and transmits the completed feasibility study and the Chief's report to congressional authorizing committees for consideration.

Some projects experience cost or design changes after authorization. If project features or estimated costs change significantly, additional congressional authorization may be necessary to modify the project authorization.

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Programmatic Authorization. Congress has granted USACE programmatic authorities—[Continuing Authorities Programs](#) (CAPs)—that enable USACE and nonfederal sponsors to undertake cost-shared projects of limited scope and cost without requiring project-specific congressional authorization. Congress also has authorized USACE to engage in [technical assistance](#) for certain activities, such as flood risk mitigation and watershed studies, and to provide [environmental infrastructure assistance](#) for certain publicly owned facilities (e.g., municipal water supply and wastewater collection projects).

Resources on USACE Authorizations

- CRS Report R45185, *Army Corps of Engineers: Water Resource Authorization and Project Delivery Processes*
- USACE, “[Signed Chief Reports](#)”
- CRS In Focus IF11106, *Army Corps of Engineers: Continuing Authorities Programs*
- CRS In Focus IF11184, *Army Corps of Engineers: Environmental Infrastructure Assistance*

Water Resources Development Acts

Congress generally authorizes USACE studies, projects, and programs and makes changes to the agency’s policies through omnibus authorization acts, typically titled [Water Resources Development Acts](#) (WRDAs). WRDAs generally authorize new activities that are added to the pool of existing authorized activities.

Authorization provisions in WRDAs can be project-specific, programmatic, or general directives. Most project-specific authorizations in WRDAs fall into three general categories: project studies, construction projects, and modifications to existing projects. WRDAs also have established deauthorization processes and/or have deauthorized individual projects.

In Section 7001 of the Water Resources Reform and Development Act of 2014 (33 U.S.C. §2282d), Congress established an [annual process](#) for nonfederal entities to [submit](#) to USACE proposals for site-specific studies and modifications to existing authorizations. The ASACW transmits a [report](#) to USACE’s congressional authorizing committees containing the proposals. Congress may authorize new feasibility studies or amend existing authorizations using these Section 7001 reports (e.g., the [2021 report](#)) or other information.

Since the 1980s, Congress generally has considered WRDAs biennially; the timing of enactment has varied. Congress enacted WRDA-type legislation in 2000, 2007, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2020. Congress enacted [WRDA 2020](#) (Division AA of P.L. 116-260) in December 2020.

After WRDA enactment, USACE may develop implementation guidance for some provisions. As of November 2021, USACE has released [implementation guidance](#) for selected WRDA 2020 provisions. Guidance documents for other provisions remain in development.

Numerous projects authorized for construction in previous WRDAs remain unfunded. As of spring 2021, USACE estimated its construction backlog at \$109 billion. Nonfederal sponsors and Congress often remain interested in [means](#) for pursuing these studies and construction activities.

Resources on WRDA Considerations

- CRS Insight IN11118, *Army Corps of Engineers: Section 7001 Annual Report on Future Studies and Projects*
 - USACE, “[Report to Congress on Future Water Resources Development](#)”
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- CRS In Focus IF11322, *Water Resources Development Acts: Primer*
- CRS In Focus IF11700, *Water Resources Development Act of 2020*
- USACE, “[WRDA 2020 Implementation Guidance](#)”

Appropriations

The majority of USACE’s appropriations are used to perform work on geographically specific studies and congressionally authorized projects (e.g., study and construction of new and modified projects, O&M of constructed projects). Congress typically appropriates funds for USACE activities in [annual Energy and Water Development appropriations acts](#) (e.g., \$7.8 billion in FY2021).

USACE’s annual appropriations process generally involves three major milestones (see **Figure 1**): the [President’s budget request](#), congressional deliberation and enactment of appropriations, and Administration development of a [USACE work plan](#) allocating funds to specific studies and projects. In the 117th Congress, both the House and the Senate also included congressionally directed funding for site-specific projects (i.e., *community project funding* [CPF]) in the [FY2022 appropriations process](#), the first such funding since the 111th Congress.

Figure 1. USACE Annual Appropriations Process



Source: Congressional Research Service (CRS).

Congress has also used [supplemental appropriations](#) to fund USACE emergency specific flood-related response and recovery activities (e.g., \$5.7 billion in Division B, Title IV, of P.L. 117-43) and to advance other purposes, such as general [investments in infrastructure](#) (e.g., \$17.1 billion in Division J, Title III, of P.L. 117-58). For some supplemental appropriations, Congress has directed USACE to publish [spend plans](#) identifying funded studies and projects.

Resources on USACE Appropriations

- USACE, “[Civil Works Budget and Performance](#)”
- CRS Report R46320, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Annual Appropriations Process and Issues for Congress*
- CRS In Focus IF11846, *Army Corps of Engineers: FY2022 Budget Request*
- CRS In Focus IF11945, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: Supplemental Appropriations*

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