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Spending Run Amok: President Should Veto Water Resources Development Act

Nicola Moore and Alison Acosta Fraser

The Water Resources Development Act (WRDA), or H.R. 1495, offers more evidence that Members of Congress have abandoned their pledge to get spending under control. Due to egregious spending and a plethora of new earmarks, the conference report inflates the bill's price tag by 53 percent.

Former Office of Management and Budget Director Rob Portman promised that a presidential veto would result from these excesses. Though the conference report passed both chambers with a high margin of votes, the President should remain firm. By vetoing the bill, he would save taxpayers money while sending Congress an important message about fiscal responsibility.

A Bad Bill Made Worse. The bill has two key problems that merit a presidential veto: excessive spending and the use of federal tax dollars to fund state and local responsibilities.

The original House and Senate versions of the bill would have cost taxpayers $15 billion and $14 billion, respectively, and included a slew of pet projects. Both amounts vastly exceeded the President's original request of $4.9 billion. Rather than split the difference, creative conferees threw open the barn doors to even more egregious spending and "airdropped" earmarks. The final bill now costs more than $23 billion.

The larger price tag is largely the result of a slew of questionable earmarks. While most projects in the Army Corps of Engineers budget undergo a thorough cost–benefit analysis, many of the earmarks were won by lobbyists working on behalf of special interests representing beach-front property owners.[1] The WRDA includes the following "beach nourishment" projects: $63 million for Lido Key Beach in Sarasota, Florida; $21 million for Imperial Beach, California; and $10.6 million for Pawley Island, South Carolina.

In addition, many of the projects in the bill fall outside the primary mission of the Army Corps of Engineers and ought to be rejected. While the Corps is intended to pursue projects such as facilitating commercial navigation and mitigating storm damage, the bill would spend: $20 million for sewer overflow infrastructure in Atchison, Kansas; $15 million for wastewater infrastructure in Willmar, Minnesota; and $5 million for drinking water infrastructure for the Village of Kyrias-Joel, New York.

Wastewater, drinking water, and sewer infrastructure projects are ordinarily funded at the state and local level. WRDA shifts these costs onto federal taxpayers, most of whom will never see, use, or benefit from the projects.

Why the President Should Veto the Bill. Congress started the year with a pledge to uphold fiscal discipline. WRDA is yet another abandonment of that pledge—along with the farm bill, the fiscal 2008

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

appropriations bills, and the dramatic expansion of the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

With a showdown looming between Congress and the White House over appropriations bills, a veto of WRDA would send an important signal: True fiscal responsibility requires spending discipline on every piece of legislation, not just the 12 annual spending bills.

Conclusion. WRDA is a prime example of legislation run amok; it is filled with excessive spending that is outside the scope of the legislation. Federal taxpayers should not have to foot the bill for the demands of special and parochial interests. A veto would affirm the President's commitment to spending discipline and would remind Members of Congress about their promises of fiscal restraint.

—Nicola Moore is Research Coordinator for, and Alison Acosta Fraser is Director of, the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

1. Ron Utt, "The Water Resources Development Act of 2007: A Pork Fest for Wealthy Beach-Front Property Owners," *WebMemo* No. 1458, May 15, 2007, at *www.heritage.org/Research/Budget/wm1458.cfm.*