

# WebMemo



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## Improving the Performance of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

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The extensive flooding of New Orleans caused by several breaks in the levee system during Hurricane Katrina led to an extensive debate about the performance of the Army Corps of Engineers in protecting Americans from natural disasters. In the months following Katrina's assault on the Gulf Coast, many public officials, civil engineers, and policy analysts began to question both the quality of the Corps' work and the spending priorities Congress imposes on it. In particular, there is considerable evidence that lobbyists and Members of Congress systematically redirect Corps' spending for the benefit of influential private interests at the expense of essential flood control and protection. An amendment proposed by Senators John McCain (R-AZ) and Russ Feingold (D-WI) would create an independent commission to review select Corps projects. This would be a major step towards reform of the Corps.

As a Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* and the *Washington Post* have recently reported,<sup>1</sup> a substantial portion of Corps spending supports harbor and channel maintenance that benefit specific shipping companies, new irrigation projects that benefit crops like rice that already receive extensive federal subsidies from the Department of Agriculture, recreational boating facilities, and beach replenishment programs to enhance the value of seaside vacation homes. As a result of these diversions to low-priority pur-

poses, Corps' spending on flood and storm protection have accounted for only about 12 percent of its budget in recent years.

Absent any formal mechanism to rate Corps projects and establish priorities for investments that benefit ordinary Americans, not just lobbyists and special interests, the Corps will continue on the same ineffective course that contributed to last year's disaster in new Orleans. And with the Corps already working under a 35-year backlog of projects totaling \$58 billion, these management deficiencies will persist for decades.

Senators John McCain and Russ Feingold propose to remedy this deadly deficiency with an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act that would require independent peer review if a project costs more than \$40 million, the Governor of an affected state requests a review, a federal agency with statutory authority to review a project finds that it will have a significant adverse impact, or the Secretary of the Army determines that a project is controversial. Their amendment would also require an independent safety review for

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This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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flood control projects involving issues of public safety. While the McCain-Feingold proposal is a big step in the right direction, the independent review commission should also be encouraged to comment on the Corps' broad resource allocations to ensure that priority projects involving issues of public safety are not delayed because of diversions

to beach resorts, environmental remediation, and irrigation of crops already in substantial surplus.

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1. Ronald D. Utt, "The Army Corps of Engineers: Reallocating Its Spending to Offset Reconstruction Costs in New Orleans," Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 1892, November 4, 2005; and Michael Grunwald, "Money Flowed to Questionable Projects; State Still Leads in Army Corps Spending, but Millions Had Nothing to Do With Floods," *The Washington Post*, September 8, 2005, p. A1.