

How the Corps of Engineers Gets its Money

From Press Book to Work Plan

The civilian water resources functions of the Army Corps of Engineers are funded by Congress through the annual Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill. Both the House and Senate Appropriations Committees have subcommittees that are responsible for developing that bill each year.

The Corps cannot undertake any activity unless it has been specifically designated using funds appropriated in that bill. In addition, no funds can be appropriated for the Corps unless they have been previously authorized by Congress. Authorization bills are usually passed by Congress every two years. Although they state how much money a project will cost, those dollars need to be funded by a separate appropriations bill.

Here's how you can track the Corps unique funding process:

Each year, the President proposes a Corps budget as part of his annual submission to Congress in early February. Don't spend your time looking at that document for anything but the overall amount proposed for the Corps. You need to look elsewhere to find the President's proposed earmarks for the Corps as well as totals and other information about the various types of projects. That information can be found in what is called the "Press Book" on the Corps' website. It's usually available the same day as the President's budget recommendations are announced. Did you think that earmarks were not allowed? Think again. While Congress has prohibited itself from the practice known as earmarking, it let the President continue his historic practice of earmarking just this one agency's funding. After the President's budget is released, Congress will get to work on what it agrees and disagrees with in the President's recommendation. Since the President historically lowballs the Corps' budget, Congress will appropriate pots of money to plus-up the Corps budget to an appropriate level. Once the House and Senate pass their respective funding bills for the Corps, they will conference and determine final top-line figures. The Office of Management and Budget will then allocate those funds to specific projects in the Work Plan.

How to Use the Press Book →

Here's how to use the Press Book:

Find your state and then look first at the column titled "Project". It lists the name of the study or project. Sometimes the listed name is different from a common name used locally. However, the Corps name listed here and in other documents is the one used by Congress. Next to the project name are columns that list dollar amounts, all missing the final three zeros. The column they are in indicates whether the funding is provided in the Corps' "Investigations", "Construction", or "Operation & Maintenance" accounts. Even if a project is listed in the Press Book, it can be zeroed out by Congress, or the amount requested by the President can be raised or lowered.

What happens if you don't find a specific project? It probably means the Administration is not proposing any funding for it. If that's the case, look at the Corps funding bill passed by Congress later in the year. Since Congress has prohibited itself from adding projects by name, it adds pots of "Additional Funding" for each Corps account. How that funding gets allocated is in the hands of the Corps but must be approved by the White House Office of Management and Budget – the same office that put together the President's budget earmarks. While Corps Districts, Divisions and ultimately Headquarters make recommendations to the Administration via the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, it is OMB that makes the call on the final list, referred to as a "Corps Work Plan." Members of Congress can try to influence the plan, but they cannot approve or disapprove it when it's released. Work Plans can be found on the Corps' website

For more information, email Howard@waterlog.net