



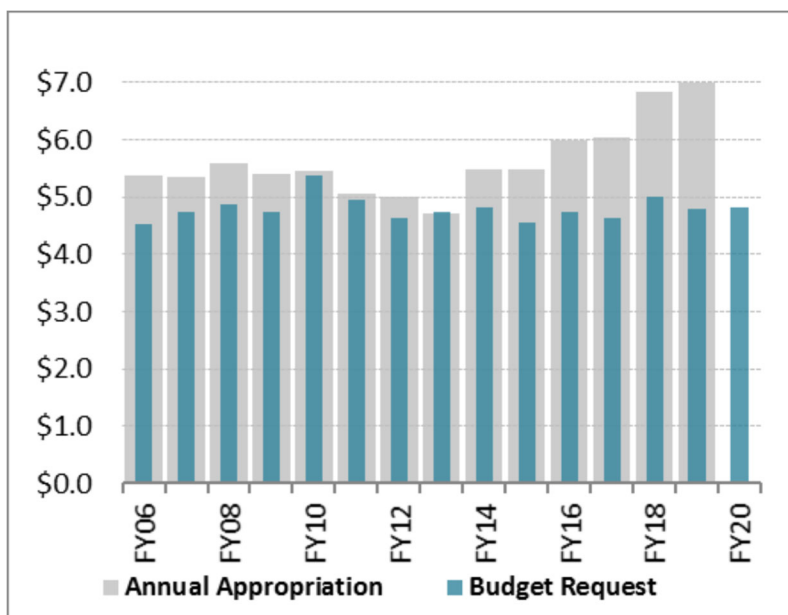
What Does Congress Know About the Corps?

By Howard Marlowe

[Editor’s Note: I sent a draft version of this blog post to over a hundred Corps employees a month ago asking for comments and suggestions. I got several responses and have incorporated many of the suggestions I received into this final version. Many thanks to all who took the time to express their views.]

The Corps of Engineers is a unique agency for many reasons. It’s divided into military and civilian functions, with the latter getting an annual budget that is small by federal government standards. It’s part of the Army which is part of the Defense Department. That means the Corps’ Civil Works mission is far down the Defense Department food chain. On the other hand, the Corps actually moves dirt, to use the current phrase. It has built water resources projects throughout the country, which means every member of Congress has at least one Corps project. That’s the main way Congress knows the Corps. Sometimes they have complaints, but mostly they rely on you and don’t hesitate a moment to issue press releases about what they’ve done for their favorite Corps projects.

Congress has spoken with a single voice about the Corps, with the important exception of providing the agency with money. From this chart from the Congressional Research Service, you can see congressional funding trending upwards while presidential requests have trended downward.



Annual Appropriations vs Budget Request

We don't have a final FY20 appropriations bill yet, but we can use the pending bills for an indication of congressional support for the Corps' civil works program. The President requested almost \$5 billion for FY20. The House responded to that with a 41 percent boost that is \$357 million over the \$7 billion final number in FY19. The pending Senate bill comes in even higher at \$7.8 billion. That's not as much as any of us would like, but it's a very healthy boost that may be the largest of any Federal agency.

Bottom Line #1: Members of Congress relate to the Corps on a project-specific basis. Overall, they like those projects and want to provide the funding to maintain them. What Congress doesn't have is very much control over which studies, projects and national programs receive the funding. Members of Congress relinquished that power 11 years ago when give up its ability to earmark. The only problem is, they didn't take away the President's earmark power. If they add \$2 billion to the President's earmarks, the final decision on allocating those funds is in the hands of the President through the Office of Management and Budget. My colleague, Dan Ginolfi, has written about OMB recently. Unfortunately, most members of Congress have no idea how much OMB micromanages the Corps' budget, studies, authorizations and procedures.

I have worked with Congress since the 1980's, mostly on water resources policies and projects. They understand less about how the Corps operates and the policies that affect it today than they did before. That's because District and Division commanders aren't as open in what they communicate to the Hill. Corps civilian leaders at all levels seem increasingly less willing to reach out to tell Congress about their *real* needs. If Congress doesn't know, they can't help. There are green suits on Capitol Hill every day providing key members of Congress with that insight for defense matters, but not for the Corps' civil works program. To be clear, I'm not talking about briefings that explain what's in the President's budget; I'm referring to conversations about what's not there plus the challenges of attracting and holding onto a qualified workforce. Former President Jimmy Carter would be happy to know that his goal of establishing White House control over the Corps has been achieved at long last.

There are times when Congress hears about problems from interest groups and tries to act by adopting a corrective policy in WRDA. For example, the pilot programs and rule changes made to encourage more beneficial use of sand, however, the policymaking committee of Congress never consults with the funding committee, so the program goes underfunded or not funded at all. In the case of the Beneficial Use Pilot Program, it got some funding only because there was local and congressional support for it. With the Corps' budget essentially flat-lined, the [BUPP](#) offers an important lesson for Corps District officials; Increase your customer focus. Let them know what the Corps can do for them and what it can't, but also let them know they need to speak out to Congress and up the Corps chain of command. It may surprise you that local officials are often afraid to speak up with the District takes a position they don't agree with. They don't want to be blacklisted, so let them know you understand it's a partnership and you welcome their thoughts as well as their cost-share.

Bottom Line #2: Your customers have the power to help you deal with the constraints of bureaucracy and funding. Reach out to them. Nurture them. Let them know the challenges of funding as well as the chain of command, Some Districts are getting better at community outreach so that local and state officials know about the toolbox the Corps has to help them manager rising seas and increased sunny day flooding. If you have examples of outreach in your District that we can publish, please send them along with any comments you would prefer to be held in *strict confidence* to howard@waterlog.net.

