

Infrastructure by Nicholas F. Benton

Depriving America of water

A new congressional bill would put 300 vitally needed water projects under the ax.

The House began debate Nov. 5 of HR 6, the so-called Water Resources Conservation, Development, and Infrastructure Improvement and Rehabilitation Act.

It is staggering to consider that it has been 15 years since a comprehensive water authorization act has been passed. Nothing related to water resources development has been passed since 1976.

And this bill, HR 6, does very little to improve the catastrophic decline of the nation's water infrastructure that has occurred over the 15-year interim. The bill calls for \$18 billion in improvements, but most of that is provisional upon cost sharing with local and regional entities, as well as on user fees and heavy borrowing.

Most striking is that the bill calls for the cancellation of over 300 water projects authorized (but never funded) by earlier Congresses worth an estimated \$11.1 billion. These projects date back to the 1950s, in some cases, mostly involving flood control and navigation improvements.

By contrast, the only significant capital improvements called for in the entire bill—those for locks and dams in Title II—are limited to single projects on the Black Warrior-Tombigbee, Ohio, Kanawha (West Virginia), Monongahela, Mississippi, and Columbia Rivers. This is a total of only five new dams and two replacements.

Port development is contingent upon cost sharing, and a \$1 billion per year fund to help finance construction,

operation, and maintenance of all port and harbor projects. This fund would be financed in part by a 0.04% ad valorem tax (4¢ on every \$100 value) on imports and exports.

On top of that, non-federal entities would be required to fund a portion of each project depending on its size: the formula stipulates that the smaller the project, the less the non-federal entity has to pay. That is, for port improvement projects with depths of only 14-20 feet, the federal government would foot 90% of the bill, but for a project of 20-45 feet in depth, it would pay only 75%, and for projects more than 45 feet deep, only 50%.

This is, of course, an overwhelming incentive to "think small," were anyone thinking at all about port improvements.

The same kind of formula holds true for the cost-sharing in flood-control programs, and the bill's authors go out of their way to stress the environmental protection features built into the legislation.

For example, there is an Environmental Protection Mitigation Fund with \$35 million and an Office of Environmental Policy created by the bill within the Army Corps of Engineers. The function of the Corps is altered by the bill to stress dam inspection and repair, rather than engineering new projects. Repairs on dams found "unsafe" by such a new environmental witchhunting agency would have to be paid for up to 20% by the dam owner if they are not federally owned.

Needless to say, this new wrinkle is likely to lead to shutting down more dams than are planned to be put up.

Finally, the bill calls for the creation of a new National Board on Water Policy to coordinate water-project activities between local, state, and federal agencies. This new policy agency will effectively throttle any local or regional efforts to devise major water development efforts should they develop under the pressures of "equality of sacrifice."

As horrendous as this bill is when laid against the nation's actual water infrastructure needs, the consummate irony is that the Gramm-Rudman budget-cutting mania sweeping the Congress now spells deep trouble for the idea of spending even the limited amount of money called for in the bill for useful projects.

This despite the fact that the bill entirely ignores the scope of the nation's water problem, and instead places the country within a zero-growth straitjacket that could wind up depopulating the country even faster than war.

The oligarchic enemies of the kind of the development the United States has enjoyed since making its revolution against a colonial system 200 years ago have always recognized the prime importance of water as a valuable natural resource of political control. Where you control water, you control people. People don't go very far without water.

In particular, this is why the British fought so hard to retain control of the Columbia River, one of the continent's most powerful, and still control that part of our continent where 29% of the entire planet's fresh water is found on land; namely, Canada.

HR 6 locks up our nation's vital water resources in this way, by our own hand.