



Committee on Natural Resources U.S. House of Representatives

Chairman Doc Hastings

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CONTACT: [Press Office](#)
202-226-9019

Chairman Hastings' Statement at Conference Committee Meeting on WRRDA

WASHINGTON, D.C. – House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Doc Hastings (WA-04) delivered the following opening statement today at the Conference Committee meeting on the Water Resources Reform & Development Act (WRRDA):

“Thank you Madam Chairman. I’m pleased to be here as we open this conference committee on this important legislation.

America’s water infrastructure is vital to our economy – tying our farmers and manufacturers to customers across the country and around the globe. One of our nation’s premier waterways – the Columbia River system – flows right through the heart of my Central Washington district, providing power generation, navigation, irrigation, flood control and other benefits. The water resources bills before us speak to maintaining our investment in these dams and reservoirs as well as the ports along our rivers and coasts in order to maintain our competitiveness overseas and create more job opportunities at home.

I am pleased that both versions of this bill acknowledge the importance of streamlining the environmental review process under the National Environmental Policy Act, or “NEPA.” These efforts build on the measures included in the 2007 WRDA bill and last year’s highway bill, “MAP-21.” These common sense reforms help provide a more coordinated and timely regulatory review by agencies. All too often the NEPA process is used as a blueprint for special interest obstruction and as a magnet for endless red tape and litigation. As Chairman of the Natural Resources Committee in the House, I can say that we are pleased to see the bipartisan interest in responsibly streamlining the burdensome NEPA process in the water project context and we hope this can serve as a model to build upon in the future.

There are of course, a few issues that concern me. For example, there is conflicting language in the two bills related to ocean policy. My committee has spent the last two and a half years trying to get answers to simple questions related to the Administration’s Executive Order to impose a National Ocean Policy. This Policy, which has never been authorized by Congress, will affect not just ocean users, but will affect any activity that occurs in or near a watershed. The Administration has refused to answer questions related to how much they are spending this new Policy and what existing programs are suffering as

a result. A bipartisan provision in the House bill would limit new funding until legitimate questions are answered. Congress should not be creating a new off-budget fund that will restrict ocean and inland activities. An off-budget fund that would be imposed on top of the dozens of federal programs that already exist in this area.

These matters are not only of consequence to the economies of coastal communities, but also of consequence to economic activities far inland. The bottom line is that this conference should not enact new ocean spending programs when we already have other – congressionally authorized – federal programs addressing these issues, and when the Administration continues to stonewall Congressional oversight. And when we continue to run substantial deficits.

Another area of concern relates to dam operations. WRDA legislation has traditionally and, I believe appropriately, provided Congress and the ratepayers who pay for these facilities, with the opportunity to ensure the proper oversight over federal water projects – not just the funding of these particular projects, but also the project purposes. In many cases we are talking about complicated dam operations that serve multiple functions and must balance sometimes competing uses for limited resources. As members of Congress, it's our responsibility to make sure the needs of our local communities are not lost in the federal bureaucracy. Language in the Senate bill, however, would give the Corps of Engineers broad discretion to change project purposes at their projects without congressional approval and with little or no input from ratepayers. This would be a mistake.

The point of both of these bills is to rein in bureaucracy, yet this particular provision does the exact opposite – it would empower an unelected bureaucracy to unilaterally act to reverse law enacted by Congress. The Congress should not forfeit its responsibility to ensure that the billions of taxpayer dollars that flow to these multi-purpose projects are managed responsibly and meeting the needs of our constituents. I believe the House spoke clearly on this issue when it approved my amendment reasserting that the longstanding practice of congressional oversight over project purposes should remain with Congress.

Thank you, Madam Chairman. I look forward to working with this conference on these issues so that we are able to produce a fiscally responsible conference report that will maintain our commitment to sustain and enhance our nation's water resources infrastructure."

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