

Beachfront pork: Bad science and bad federal policy  
A framework for increasing coastal vulnerability and risk

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Congress voted in mid-November to override the president's veto of the Water Resources Development Act, a bill that President Bush argues contains too much pork. A majority of members of Congress say the projects that would be funded by the act are necessary.

I believe that the Water Resources Development Act is bad policy from a number of different standpoints. The bill is a massive, 250-page document authorizing spending on hundreds of engineering projects and studies. The first problem in evaluating the benefits and costs of these projects is that very few are described in any detail. They refer to an engineers' report or they refer to nothing at all. I'm certain that there are good projects in the Water Resources Development Act, but I also am certain that there are projects that do not make fiscal or scientific sense for U.S. taxpayers.

For example, bill authorizes more than half a billion dollars for beach nourishment, which is the artificial addition of sand to an eroded beach to widen it. While many coastal engineers argue that these projects are storm protection, no one argues that they are long-term fixes to shoreline retreat in an age of rising sea levels.

Furthermore, the storm-protection benefit serves primarily the oceanfront property owners. In a Katrina-sized storm, the nourished beach will serve absolutely no purpose. In the end, the federal government has authorized huge expenditures to keep a nice beach in front of the investment homes of the wealthy.

Of even greater concern is language inserted into the "general provisions" section of the bill making it the "policy of the United States to promote beach nourishment" and committing the country to a long-term policy of trying to hold this nation's shorelines in place at increasing and never-ending expense. This is bad science and bad fiscal policy.

The bill also is filled with some very significant inconsistencies. Billions of dollars are authorized for coastal navigation projects. This includes things like dredging inlets and harbors. In the same document, the bill authorizes the federal government to support beach nourishment projects along beaches that have been impacted by federal navigation projects.

In other words, the Water Resources Development Act calls for numerous dredging projects that may harm neighboring beaches, and then directs the federal government to pay for beach nourishment adjacent to the navigation projects. This is why the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is so busy. The corps gets funds to create the problems and then they

get more funds to fix the problems that they create. It inflicts heavy environmental damage (see, for example, the Everglades or southern Louisiana), and then the corps gets massive funds to attempt restoration. This current incarnation of the bill perpetuates this endless cycle.

Finally, the greatest inconsistency in the Water Resources Development Act is in its handling of development in hazardous or flood-prone areas. The act states that it is the policy of the United States to "avoid the unwise use of floodplains and flood-prone areas and minimizing adverse impacts and vulnerabilities." Yet, many of the projects authorized under the act do exactly the opposite. They encourage people to remain in high-hazard areas by providing funds to attempt meaningless protection.

Years from now, we may look back at the Water Resources Development Act and recognize a significant failure of our leadership to seriously tackle the risk of flood and storm hazards to infrastructure and lives. Much of the spending on the Gulf Coast is designed to keep people and communities right where they are, despite the reality of rising sea level and increasing risk. There is no spending authorized to seek the only real solution to coastal hazards -- strategic relocation of some of our vulnerable infrastructure.

In fact, the act demands that the federal government expedite projects in the most dangerous areas, reducing the time for proper planning, scientific investigation and thoughtfulness. It is my opinion, based on 20 years of research, that the act creates a framework for increasing this nation's coastal vulnerability and risk rather than decreasing it. The peer-review process that allegedly reforms the corps is fatally flawed in numerous ways.

Throwing billions of dollars at coastal storm "protection" with the dream of preserving the status quo may sell well in individual districts. The beachfront pork being delivered to shoreline communities may help get coastal members of Congress re-elected, but it is bad science and bad federal policy. And, it may ultimately cost lives.

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