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David Vitter ready for top GOP environment panel job

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Sens. David Vitter and Barbara Boxer have something in common.

At least that's what the conservative Louisiana senator hopes as he prepares to take over the top Republican slot on the Environment and Public Works Committee.

The Southern conservative and the Left Coast firebrand both represent coastal states burdened by flood control problems, and they know that infrastructure spending is the key to keeping their constituents happy.

Vitter is set to take over as the panel's ranking member just in time to play a key role in ferrying through legislation that would authorize the Army Corps of Engineers to take on a host of projects. And at the mouth of the Mississippi River, that's a big deal.

"We probably deal with and are at the mercy of the Corps of Engineers more than any other state," Vitter told POLITICO.

He expressed hopes that by midway through 2013, the coming Congress will pass the first Water Resources Development Act since 2007. The authorization bill typically includes a laundry list of transportation, water, infrastructure and environmental projects, but now supporters have to find a way to enact it without earmarks.

"I think there's a great deal of interest in following up on our highway bill ... with a similar bipartisan success on a new [Water Resources Development Act] bill," Vitter said.

Boxer, the panel's chairwoman, is interested in pursuing the legislation as well, aides say. Vitter and the California Democrat have worked together before — recently, they collaborated on a bill that shifted the penalties from the Deepwater Horizon oil spill from a trust fund to the states to spend.

Both are keen to reform the corps' spending process.

"I have a number of special corps reform ideas that I really want to include," Vitter said, calling the agency a "broken bureaucracy in a lot of ways."

For example, Vitter hopes to transfer project management responsibility for several corps projects to states or local leadership, out of federal hands. That would streamline the process to act more like highway funding, he said.

Instead of earmarks, Boxer and Vitter both talk about hammering out criteria on which projects in the bill would be judged.

This isn't Vitter's first time around on the water resources bill — he was a key voice on the

2007 version, pulling \$3.6 billion to Louisiana for flood and hurricane protection and coastal restoration. President George W. Bush vetoed the bill but Congress overrode him.

Boxer led that bill for the Senate as EPW chairwoman, along with Sens. Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.). They passed a \$27 billion bill that included some hard-fought reforms to how the corps evaluates and plans projects, which environmentalists had hoped would allow the corps to focus on protecting floodplains and wetlands. Broader corps reforms proved politically difficult and ultimately too controversial, however.

The bill is timely now, given the national attention to Hurricane Sandy's devastation of New York and New Jersey, as well as Hurricane Isaac, which hit Louisiana in August during the Republican National Convention.

"There are special hurricane flood protection needs in Louisiana that I'll be trying to address," Vitter said. "We have enormous continuing needs."

While the water bill may be a bipartisan effort, it's doubtful that Vitter's time on the committee will be all kumbaya singalongs.

"Anything more directly environmental regulation related" is "tougher because we're so far apart," Vitter acknowledged.

Vitter takes over the panel's top Republican spot from Oklahoma Sen. Jim Inhofe — the man who literally wrote the book on global warming as a hoax, mounted a public relations campaign that took down a Texas-based Environmental Protection Agency leader and has led a drumbeat of attacks on President Barack Obama's environmental policies, particularly on behalf of the coal industry.

Inhofe is at the end of his six-year limit as ranking member of the committee, following several years as chairman before Boxer took over in 2007.

While they share similarly conservative viewpoints, Vitter and Inhofe's energy-industry hearts are in different places. Vitter is not nearly as vocal as Inhofe on coal issues — he's an oil and gas man, and that industry provides the largest chunk of his campaign funding.

Opponents on the Hill put it a bit more harshly: "While Inhofe is more of an ideologue and true believer, Vitter is simply in the pocket of industry and follows their orders," said one Democratic aide.

Others note Vitter's well-known connection to the chemicals industry, which has a strong presence in Louisiana. That connection is certain to come up in Vitter's other key priority as ranking member, which he shares with Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.): reforming the 1976 Toxic Substances Control Act, which governs EPA regulation of chemicals.

But he and Lautenberg are far from compromise now. Lautenberg's Safe Chemicals Act, which passed out of the committee this summer, would require significant new testing and public reporting of potentially dangerous chemicals in household use. Vitter wants more regulatory certainty for industry, which has raised concerns about trade secrets and other liabilities.

"I don't think the bill that Frank Lautenberg put out is something that can ever pass the Senate," Vitter said.

While less bombastic than Inhofe, Vitter said he shares his fellow Republican's wariness about a "hyper-aggressive" EPA, especially in regulations on fracking.

On the other hand, he has come down hard on utilities in his state. In September, for example, he called on state authorities to force utilities to sell their assets if they fail to perform during storms, the Times-Picayune reported.

And his modus operandi is different from Inhofe's: Vitter has always been more willing to play back-room politics — holding up political appointments and horse trading to get what he wants — rather than giving 45-minute floor speeches about the pitfalls of environmental regulations.

He's willing to put public pressure on the administration, though.

Last year, Vitter declared he was "keeping the 'boot on the neck' of Interior" by delaying a raise for Interior Secretary Ken Salazar until his department started issuing permits for deepwater exploratory wells in the Gulf at a fast-enough rate.

He's also held up administration nominations in exchange for sway on issues. Vitter has been one of several senators holding up the appointment of popular former EPW staffer Ken Kopocis to head EPA's water office, and he made it known before the election that he wouldn't be OK with one name being floated as a potential Mitt Romney EPA administrator.

On the other hand, Vitter is traditionally less of a bulldog on climate change issues than Inhofe.

"I'm a skeptic in terms of the left's religion about human activity" being responsible for climate change, Vitter said. "But I've not spent the time and energy" on the issue the way Inhofe has.

The issue is still bound to come up in coming months, as aides say Boxer plans to bring up climate change in hearings in light of Sandy. Democrats are also likely to push for part of WRDA to include authorization for research on how regions should adapt to changes in climate.