

Public works committee offers senator a policy niche

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BATON ROUGE — As Congress prepares to pass its first water resources bill since 2007, possibly in the middle of next year, Louisiana's junior senator is preparing to take on a key role with the Senate committee charged with shepherding a deal to the floor.

The move favors Sen. David Vitter of Metairie, who is slated to become the ranking Republican on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

In the past, the Water Resources Development Act has included a long list of massive projects for everything from transportation and drainage to coastal restoration and hurricane protection.

With House members interested in crafting a new water resources bill as well, Vitter is uniquely positioned to insert what he labels as "reforms" targeting the Army Corps of Engineers.

Plus, there's the timing, with Hurricane Isaac fresh in the memories of south Louisiana residents and Hurricane Sandy's wake still affecting the East Coast.

Vitter said he and other Republicans have appealed to Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman Barbara Boxer, a California Democrat, and expressed their desire to work in a "bipartisan manner" to implement reforms for the Corps of Engineers.

Democrats have a majority in the U.S. Senate and maintained that edge following the recent elections.

Boxer most recently held a hearing Thursday on the Water Resources Development Act of 2012.

Vitter said it was "long-awaited and much needed, and steps to move forward are appreciated," but added the two parties need to get closer together on the bill.

“A successful bill needs to include bipartisan concerns,” he said. “In particular, the Army Corps of Engineers needs to be held accountable for the construction and operation of our waterways, dams, locks and levees that protect people from disasters like hurricanes Isaac and Sandy.”

To ensure that the next Water Resources Development Act bill “addresses the full scope of the challenges facing our nation’s water resources infrastructure,” Vitter and other Republicans on the committee want hearings and staff focused on the following policy issues:

- Reforms that expedite and improve the corps’ project delivery process.
- Solutions that address the policy and funding challenges facing the Inland Waterway Trust Fund and the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund.
- Oversight of the corps’ implementation guidance and internal policies.
- Prioritization of water resource projects.

The prioritization process is among the areas of great interest to Vitter.

“In a time of constrained federal funding and a moratorium on Congressionally-directed spending, we must establish a process and criteria to ensure that the Corps does not act unilaterally when determining the water resource priorities in our states,” he wrote in a recent letter to Boxer.

Both are reportedly committed to creating a criteria for projects to be funded in the bill, as opposed to granting earmarks.

In a prepared statement following this week’s committee hearing, Boxer said the bill “recognizes the need to expand the sources of funding available to water resources projects,” but she didn’t offer other details.

“Funding for water infrastructure projects has been insufficient to meet current needs,” she said.

Boxer added the bill would likewise contain many other reforms, including “increasing flexibility for non-federal sponsors of corps projects, encouraging the corps to fully implement ongoing efforts to accelerate project delivery, urging the expenditure of funds collected in the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, reforming the process for delivery of inland waterways projects and establishing a National Levee Safety Program.”

The last time a Water Resources Development Act was passed by Congress, Louisiana received more than \$3.6 billion in aid. But it wasn’t a seamless process.

Former President George W. Bush originally vetoed the legislation, only to be overridden soon after by members of Congress.

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