WRDA override lacks funds
Congress bypasses Bush for up to $7B in coastal restoration
by Richard A. Webster

The $23-billion Water Resources Development Act is potentially the most significant water program in state history.

Gov.-elect Bobby Jindal hailed the political breakthrough.

"This is a great victory for Louisiana," Jindal said. "The override of the president’s veto of WRDA in both the House and now the Senate is a critical step toward securing more than $3 billion — and possibly as much as $7 billion — in funding for restoring our wetlands and increasing hurricane and flood protection in Louisiana.

Jindal said the authorization gives "incredible support" for projects including Morganza to the Gulf, 100-year flood protection for the greater New Orleans area, the closure and environmental restoration of the Mississippi River Gulf Outlet, and mitigation for fish and wildlife losses in the Red River Waterway.

Rep. Richard Baker, R-Baton Rouge, said WRDA could exert a $77-billion impact on the Louisiana economy while preserving the eroding coastline.

"We're vulnerable to coastal loss from repetitive storm impacts, so we have to get ourselves in a position to withstand the assault," Baker said. "But it's not enough to keep storms from eroding us away. We need to aggressively rebuild the resources we lost. This bill is a significant step toward achieving those goals.”

Others give a more restrained appraisal of WRDA.

Mark Davis, director of Tulane University's Institute on Water Resources Law, said the bill authorizes projects, but appropriates no money to begin construction.

"There's a lot of critical stuff here but as valuable as many of these projects are, they carry with them no cash," Davis said. "You can't accuse Congress of being fiscally irresponsible for passing bills that don't carry with them a nickel of expenditure. Passing this bill is like you're qualifying for a race; it doesn't mean you're winning the race. This is a license to beg."

Mark Ford, executive director of the Coalition to Restore Coastal Louisiana, said WRDA includes $1.9 billion in vital coastal restoration projects but it could take more than 10 years for any projects to be funded. Some may never receive any money.

"Occasionally we get projects authorized, and decades pass and they don't get appropriated," Ford said. "Everglades restoration was authorized in 2000 and there's been no money appropriated to help with that project. All the money that has gone into restoration of the Everglades has been put up by the state of Florida. That's what we're worried about. We just hope we get some of the more important things like coastal restoration so we can get some meaningful work done in Louisiana in the near term, which realistically is five to 10 years.”

Congress overrode President Bush's veto of WRDA last week with a 79-14 Senate vote and 361-54 in the House.

The $7-billion WRDA allocates to Louisiana projects includes $1.9 billion for coastal restoration and $886 million for hurricane protection between Morganza and the Gulf of Mexico.
Baker said WRDA has gone six years without being passed largely because Sen. Trent Lott, R-Miss., put a hold on it every time. Baker said Lott cited as his reason an unfulfilled agreement with Louisiana to divert freshwater from the Mississippi River through Lake Pontchartrain and into the Gulf of Mexico to reduce salinity levels along the Mississippi coast.

Once Baker included language in the bill addressing Lott’s concerns, the Mississippi senator cleared the way for WRDA’s passage.

Baker said it is unusual for him to break with Bush but WRDA was too important to Louisiana.

"I normally vote with the president and have one of the highest conservative ratings on fiscal matters. Ordinarily I appreciate the concern of how taxpayer money is spent and if I can’t see appropriate value being returned I vote against higher levels," Baker said. "But because these projects have been through so many review steps and have been voted on so many times by so many different congresses the consequences to Louisiana for not taking these steps outweigh consideration given whether or not spending money in this fashion is appropriate or not."

Davis said passing WRDA was essential, but the fact it has taken seven years and four congressional votes to secure passage does not speak well of the system.

"This should not be celebrated as a victory, and it should not be taken as proof that the system works," Davis said. "To take seven years to come up with a bloated, vetoed water bill that depends on an override vote is not the kind of good news people should be celebrating. I think this was a critically important thing to pass but we need to recognize that this WRDA is just as important for teaching us the limits of what this system can deliver right now."

Davis said he is also concerned because the projects included in WRDA were conceived before hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Projects are needed to address post-storm conditions but what hope does Louisiana have of securing authorization for new projects when it took seven years to pass WRDA?

"The road ahead for authorizing the bigger and more comprehensive things we know we must have won't be any easier," Davis said.

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