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Nation

Senate Overrides Bush Veto on Water Bill

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Chip Somodevilla

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Barbara Boxer (D-CA) talks to reporters after the Senate voted 79-14 to pass a \$23 billion water resources bill. Getty Images

NPR.org, November 8, 2007 · President Bush suffered the first veto override of his presidency Thursday, as the Senate enacted a \$23 billion water resources bill to fund dams, sewage plants and hundreds of other projects.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers projects are important to local communities and include money for the hurricane-hit Gulf Coast and Florida Everglades restoration efforts.

"This bill is enormously important, and it has been a long time coming," said Sen. David Vitter (R-LA), whose state was hammered by Hurricane Katrina two years ago.

The bill passed on a 79-14 vote. It was a milestone for this presidency, showing that many Republicans will defy the president on spending matters important to their political careers.

The last such veto override happened when Congress dealt President Clinton the second of his two overrides in November 1998.

President Bush vetoed no bills during his first five years in office. He has since vetoed a stem cell research bill twice, an Iraq spending bill that set guidelines for troop withdrawals, and a children's health insurance bill. House and Senate Republicans managed to sustain those vetoes. But they broke ranks on the Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA, which Bush vetoed on Nov. 2, calling it too expensive.

The president's supporters have noted that the Army Corps has a backlog of \$58 billion worth of projects and an annual budget of about \$2 billion to address them.

The bill is the first water system restoration and flood control authorization passed by Congress since 2000. It would cost \$11.2 billion over the next four years and \$12 billion in the 10 years after that, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Flood protection projects along the Gulf Coast, including 100-year levee protection in New Orleans, would cost about \$7 billion if fully funded. The bill approves projects but does not fund them.

The bill "is one of the few areas where we actually do something constructive," said Senate Minority Whip Trent Lott (R-MS). What Bush sees as pork-barrel items "are good, deserved, justified projects," Lott said.

Among other things, the bill would authorize the construction of navigation improvements for the Upper Mississippi River at an estimated federal cost of \$1.9 billion. It would also fund an ecosystem restoration project for the Upper Mississippi that will cost \$1.7 billion.

The Indian River Lagoon project in the Florida Everglades would be funded at about \$700 million.

The bill calls for an independent peer review process of all Army Corps projects costing \$45 million or more, a bid to cut down on wasteful spending.

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