

Corps of Engineers Chief Drafts Plan to Reorganize Agency

By Eric Pianin and Christopher Lee

Washington Post Staff Writers

Wednesday, September 24, 2003; Page A27

The military commander of the Army Corps of Engineers intends to launch a major reorganization next month that would strengthen the military's hand in reviewing and authorizing water projects while diminishing the role of civilian Pentagon employees and members of Congress.

Under the plan drafted by Lt. Gen. Robert B. Flowers, the Corps would be divided into eight new "regional business centers," each promoting nine lines of services ranging from navigation and flood control to recreation and environmental restoration. Unlike the current system, in which requests for harbor dredging and other major water projects must clear a series of local, regional and congressional hurdles, the new military-dominated business centers would solicit business and make most of the key decisions.

If the plan were fully implemented, it would represent a dramatic departure from current practice in which powerful members of Congress dictate the selection, pace and price tag for major projects.

Flowers intends to ask Congress to forgo its traditional line-item authority over the funding of studies of potential new projects and to consolidate and speed up the authorization and appropriations process. Lawmakers jealously guard their prerogatives and many would likely oppose the request.

He also has proposed that Congress eliminate the requirement that local communities share in the cost of project feasibility studies -- a move that would boost federal costs by \$100 million or more a year.

"We must strengthen the Regional Business Centers if we are to provide effective and efficient service to our customers, partners and the American people," Flowers said in a message to Corps officials last month. "The Regional Business Center will be the focus of our operational model."

The 227-year-old Corps has faced unprecedented scrutiny in recent years because of botched water projects and serious problems with its economic analyses, which prompted Flowers to acknowledge in testimony last year that his agency faces "a turning point." The agency has been forced to suspend work on deepening the Delaware River and a similar dredging of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, and had to restart the biggest study in its history after top officials were caught trying to skew data to justify billion-dollar lock expansions on the Mississippi River.

Lawmakers have called for major changes that would require independent peer reviews for all costly projects, an updating of agency guidelines to emphasize environmental protection and a requirement that local communities pay larger percentages of Corps port-dredging and beach-replenishment efforts.

Critics say Flowers's proposal would do practically nothing to address the concerns of lawmakers, the General Accounting Office, the National Academy of Sciences, internal Pentagon investigators and the Office of Management and Budget. Rather, they say, the changes would make it even harder for outsiders to monitor Corps activities and further shift the cost of projects from local communities to the

federal government.

"What's been learned in the last few years is that we need more vigorous oversight," said Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.). "And it's very clear the country is looking for tough requirements to ensure projects are cost-effective. . . . I think proposing less vigorous congressional oversight is a nonstarter and will meet with bipartisan opposition up here."

But Rep. Wayne T. Gilchrest (R-Md.), who is familiar with some aspects of the plan, said some of Flowers's proposals deserve consideration, especially those that would cut down on pork-barrel spending by members of Congress.

"The Corps needs to be more independent of these hungry wolves up here, these members of Congress that want projects done whether they are worthwhile or not," said Gilchrest, a member of the House Water Resources and Environment subcommittee. Jeff Ruch, executive director of Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), called the plan "a misguided vanity project for Gen. Flowers that does nothing to help the Corps' professional staff do its job."

In a letter to J.P. Woodley, the newly appointed assistant secretary of the Army for civil works, PEER warned that Flowers's plan would commit the Corps to "its own unique water resources policy and doctrine requiring only limited 'interfacing' with civilian superiors on annual legislative matters."

The Corps has about 35,000 employees, all but 650 of them civilians, and a proposed fiscal 2004 civil works budget of \$4.2 billion, an agency official said. The agency is involved in planning, designing, building and operating projects such as flood control levees, military facilities and harbor and river dredging. The Corps' civil works division functions largely as a project manager, employing engineers, architects, biologists, regulatory analysts and others who conduct studies, design plans and oversee construction.

Carol Sanders, an agency spokeswoman, said Corps officials started putting together the reorganization plans a year ago with the goal of stretching tight budget dollars. But they quickly saw the project as an opportunity to make wholesale management changes to spur efficiency, she said.

The intention, she said, is not to concentrate power in the hands of the military or inhibit Congress's oversight role, but to make the Corps less balkanized internally and more effective.

"We know that when we work in teams we can be more responsive," she said. "We get things done more quickly."

© 2003 The Washington Post Company