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EDITORIAL

Amendment would reform Army Corps project funding

The U.S. Senate this week is taking up legislation regarding authorization of project funds for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It is a process that needs reform, and we hope senators will approve a bipartisan proposal which would ensure that national priorities - and not pork-barrel spending - determine which projects the Corps undertakes.

For years, members of Congress have pushed for Corps projects beneficial to little but their own districts. The trend has grown to the point where the corps now has an estimated \$70 billion in backlogged projects.

Presidential budget plans have sought to eliminate such pork, but it consistently has been reinserted by Congress.

Now Sens. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., and John McCain, R-Ariz., have introduced an amendment to the Water Resources Development Act that would set up clear criteria to ensure that projects carried out by the Corps reflect national priorities as they relate to navigation, flood damage reduction and ecosystem restoration. The Corps currently uses a cost-benefits ratio to determine project priority, which gives more weight to economic benefits - such as jobs in a certain area - than to national needs, such as ensuring levees can hold back flood waters and rivers remain navigable.

The Feingold-McCain amendment would re-establish the Water Resource Council and order it to provide Congress with a list of which water-resources projects should get priority funding. Under the amendment, any project costing more than \$40 million would be subject to an independent review. A review also could be ordered if another federal agency challenged the project or the secretary of the Army found the project to be controversial.

The proposed reforms would help eliminate wasteful projects such as Alaska's infamous "Bridge to Nowhere," which carried a price tag of more than \$200 million.

The Feingold-McCain plan is competing with another proposal by Sens. Kit Bond, R-Mo., and James Inhofe, R-Okla. But the Bond-Inhofe plan would provide no ranking for Corps projects and would give the Corps the power to deny a request for an independent review - even if it came from a governor or the leader of a federal agency. We think the Bond-Inhofe plan would do little to change the status quo.

The devastation of Hurricane Katrina illustrated the need for the Corps of Engineers to carry out its vital mission with more coordination and funding. With federal tax dollars already being stretched, it is important that funds for the Corps are directed to those projects that will produce the greatest benefits for the nation - not for a single congressional district.

We hope senators agree.
