

WASHINGTON, DC – Congressman Earl Blumenauer (D – Ore.) and Congressman Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.), held a press conference today to discuss an amendment the two will be offering to H.R. 2864, the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 2005, when it comes before the House of Representatives for a vote this week. The Flake-Blumenauer amendment will ensure that the most expensive project in the bill, the Upper Mississippi River Lock and Dam expansion, is economically justified.

H.R. 2864 would authorize a \$1.8 billion project to extend the length of seven locks on the Upper Mississippi and Illinois Waterway. This project would be the nation's most expensive navigation project and would siphon off 10% to 15% of all Corps construction funding for decades.

“With the Corps of Engineers facing a \$58 billion backlog and a construction budget of less than \$2 billion annually, we need to make sure that scarce water resources dollars are spent on economically justified projects,” Blumenauer said. “Funding this controversial project could delay or eliminate funding for hundreds of needed projects across the country.”

The economic justification for the project would be a significant increase in barge traffic on the Upper Mississippi and Illinois Waterway. Recently however, studies by the National Academy of Sciences and the Congressional Research Service as well as recent history show that this increase is unlikely to occur. Mississippi River barge traffic was flat from 1980 to 1992 and has declined by more than a third since then.

As barge traffic has declined and existing locks have been rehabilitated, wait times to go through the locks also declined.

“The Upper Mississippi project has a particularly troubled past. As co-chair and founder of the Army Corps Reform Caucus, I believe this project epitomizes the need for reform and modernization of the Corps,” said Blumenauer.

Controversy of the Upper Mississippi River project launched the Corps Reform movement five years ago. In 2000, Corps leaders fired economist Donald Sweeney, who filed for whistle-blower protection when he claimed that Corps officials had ordered him to underestimate how much grain would be shipped to alternative non-barge destinations, such as inland rail and other processing facilities, as barge and grain prices change. The Army’s Inspector General confirmed that the Corps had manipulated data in attempt to justify the project.

Flaws in the Corps’ economic models are still outstanding. In a 2004 study, the National Academy of Sciences concluded: “The Corps has ...made substantial progress on the study during the past three years. Despite these efforts, the study contains flaws serious enough to limit its credibility and value within the policymaking process.”

Blumenauer also pointed out that most of the locks that would be replaced and expanded in the WRDA project have been rehabilitated over the past 15 years. The Corps is currently

spending \$88 million to rehabilitate Lock and Dam 24 – one of the locks included in the project.

“Our amendment protects the integrity of the Corps by allowing this project to go forward only if it is found to be economically justified. It also helps family farmers in the region by requiring congestion management measures that will ensure that the river system functions efficiently.” said Blumenauer.