

Compromise federal water bill unveiled

By Henry C. Jackson, AP

WASHINGTON – House and Senate negotiators on Thursday unveiled a compromise bill that authorizes billions of dollars for water projects over the next decade, from flood protections in California to deepening Georgia’s rapidly growing Port of Savannah.

Lawmakers released details of the Water Resources Reform and Development act a week after they announced a tentative agreement on legislation that blends House and Senate versions of the bill. The legislation will authorize 34 projects in virtually every region of the country. Lawmakers say it provides important investment in the nation’s water infrastructure.

“This legislation is about jobs and our country’s economic prosperity, and I look forward to bringing to back to the House for a final vote,” said Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, who filed the bill Thursday.

The proposed investments include projects related to both expansion and flood protection.

The bill sanctions more than \$748 million in federal funds for dredging and widening of the Sabine-Neches Waterway, an area billed as “America’s Energy Gateway” because the roughly 80-mile waterway services oil and natural gas refineries in Texas and Louisiana. The legislation also authorizes as much as \$800 million for a flood diversion project that would protect the Red River Valley region of North Dakota and parts of Minnesota, which have suffered major floods in four of the past five years.

The Senate passed its version of the bill roughly a year ago, with the House following suit in October. Since then, lawmakers have been working to thrash out differences between the two bills. The Senate's version would authorize about \$12.5 billion over the next decade, while the House's version would cost about \$8.2 billion. The compromise is expected to land somewhere in between the two, but a Congressional Budget Office estimate was not yet available.

Lawmakers have expressed a pent up demand for a water projects bill. Congress last authorized a bill in 2007 and many lawmakers have said they feared the U.S. was falling behind in its water infrastructure.

Congress would have to pass separate legislation to pay for all of the projects included in the bill.

The House is expected to vote on the bill as early as Tuesday, with the Senate following suit. Both versions of the bill easily passed previously. With the estimated cost of the bill expected to rise, though, there is some concern that more conservative Republicans might vote against it. Outside groups, including Heritage Action, have said the bill does not do enough to rein in spending.

But businesses groups – and many lawmakers – have called both versions of the bill a potential jobs engine, citing the investment in infrastructure. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce has also lobbied lawmakers in both houses to pass the bill, saying it will ensure that American businesses stay competitive.

“Legislation to improve the nation’s marine transportation system is long overdue and will grow jobs, boost international trade ... and strengthen America’s competitive edge,” said Janet Kavinoky, the executive director transportation and infrastructure with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

One effort to try to keep conservative lawmakers on board is preserved in the compromise. Addressing past concerns that

water projects bills were loaded with favors for lawmakers' districts and states, the compromise legislation eliminates roughly \$18 billion in dormant projects that were authorized prior to 2007.

The bill also sets specific time and cost limits for studies on potential projects, eliminates duplicative reviews and includes language that speeds up the environmental review process for projects.

The compromise legislation will also increase spending from the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, which will be used to fund improvements to ports and creates a five-year pilot program to provide loans and loan guarantees for various water projects.