

WATER: Conferees shelve WRDA until November

Lucy Kafanov, E&ENews PM reporter

Time has run out on the Water Resources Development Act conference report -- at least for now.

Several conferees on the WRDA reauthorization today said there is not enough time before Congress adjourns this week to address remaining differences between House and Senate versions of the bill. Negotiations will continue through October, they said, in an attempt to reach a deal prior to the lame-duck session now expected to begin Nov. 13.

The announcement follows increasing pessimism on the part of conferees this week, as staff meetings on the competing WRDA bills -- [H.R. 2864](#) and the more costly [S. 728](#) -- were unable to iron out remaining policy differences.

"We made a great deal of progress, and there was a lot of good faith compromise and negotiation involved," said Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "We just ran out of time. But we're all committed to completing a comprehensive WRDA bill when we return after the November elections."

Sen. Kit Bond (R-Mo.), a cosponsor of S. 728, said he is optimistic about WRDA's chances in the lame duck. "During the October recess we will continue to work towards completion, and I hope to get this much needed and long overdue bill passed in November," he said in a statement.

Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman James Inhofe (R-Okla.) issued a statement along similar lines, adding that a "WRDA bill is long overdue, and I have every intention of completing the bill this year."

It remains unclear what specific problems led to the holdup, but sources speculate that remaining differences center on a Senate provision on Army Corps of Engineers reform, stricter mitigation requirements and corps independent review language first offered by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Russ Feingold (D-Wis.).

Lisa Kelley, director of public policy for the National Corn Growers Association, said that most policy issues had been worked out minus a few minor details.

"I think members saw they were running out of time and had a bunch of projects to go over. They didn't want to rush through the bill without a thorough review of what's in it,"

Kelley said. "We have received assurances that the conference report can be finalized and passed in a lame-duck session."

Contradicting that sentiment somewhat was Jim Berard, director of communications for the Democrats on the T&I Committee. Berard said "a significant number of issues" remain unresolved before an agreement is possible. Even so, he said House conferees on the minority side hope to produce a bill to pass in the lame duck.