

Corps' future at stake in fight

Everglades project marks turning point for often embattled agency

By Cory Reiss

Washington Correspondent

WASHINGTON | With an \$8.4 billion Everglades restoration under way, the next big project for the Army Corps of Engineers is its own future.

The largest civil works project in the agency's history has just begun, but corps officials, interest groups and members of Congress are asking what's next. Many inside and outside the corps expect a battle to control the agency's course — and with that, the likelihood of beach renourishment, the survival of entire ecosystems and the conduct of navigation projects.

"There's a lot of pressure at work to change some of the old ways of doing business," said Rep. Earl Blumenauer, D-Oregon, who last year helped found the Congressional Army Corps Reform Caucus.

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mentalists lambaste it as destroyer of wetlands and rivers but rely on it for environmental restoration. Lawmakers assail it as a source of pork barrel spending and ineptitude, then belly up in election years to bring home water projects. The regulatory side of the agency is no less controversial.

"We are pulled in a variety of different directions. . . . Our lot in life is to pull all those disparate views together to see if we can facilitate a consensus," said Fred Caver, director of civil works. "Inevitably, conflict is involved."

Those love-hate relationships are expected to tangle in 2002. One reason is the budget crunch, which could force hard choices and shift the civil works balance of environmental and economic priorities. Also, there is a growing momentum in Congress to reform how the agency picks and implements projects, a movement that ties fiscal scrutiny to environmental agendas.

The Everglades project brings a public relations boost for the corps after recent beatings over controversial projects such as lock and dam construction on the upper Mississippi River.

"The Everglades is a significant turning point," Mr. Caver said. "If nothing else it's the largest example of an environmental restoration project. It's also indicative of the direction that we see as far as water resources needs in this country in that there is a general consensus in the country building behind those kinds of projects."

While President Bush sought a 22 percent reduction in civil works funding for the current fiscal year, figures from the corps show the percentage of the final \$4.6 billion civil works budget devoted to environmental projects increased by 7 percentage points, to 28 percent.

Mr. Bush is expected to unveil a budget Feb. 4 with a civil works allotment similar to last year's proposal of \$3.9 billion — which would be a 13 percent cut from appropriations that Congress passed last year. Congress added \$600 million to Mr. Bush's last budget, but an expected deficit of more than \$100 billion will bring

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pressure to restrain spending.

Meanwhile, the corps is considering several large environmental projects to follow up on the Everglades, including a long-term wetlands restoration of hundreds of thousands of acres along the Louisiana coast that would cost nearly double the Everglades project.

Part of the battle is expected to be waged over a Water Resources Development Act, or WRDA, a popular authorization bill that regularly gives members of Congress trophies to take home.

The backlog of authorized water projects is nearly \$40 billion by some estimates.

Reformers in Congress and environmental groups will try to stop beach building or at least shift the bulk of the cost to local and state governments.

They also want to expand en-

vironmental authorizations, re-examine unfunded projects and alter the process by which the corps selects and approaches its civil works jobs.

"The next WRDA will be a battle for the heart of the corps," said Scott Faber, water resource specialist at Environmental Defense.

A huge project like the 30-year Everglades restoration, for which nearly \$280 million in federal money was allotted in the last two years, sucks resources from other projects.

Pursuing large restorations such as the rapidly disappearing wetlands in Louisiana could shift the corps' financial focus.

"The reality of life is if you spend more money in one area, that means there's less money to spend in other areas," said Rob Vining, a corps representative on Capitol Hill.

Appropriations for beach projects hit a record \$135 million this fiscal year.