

Return to the Dam-Building Go-Go Years?

by Ron Stork, Policy Director



The U.S. big-dam go-go building years eventually slowed down around a half century ago when the nation ran out of the best dam sites and Presidents Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan put federal water projects on a fiscal diet (dam costs for water and power features had to be repaid). Declining project economics (law of diminishing returns) and reduced tolerance for environmental damage also diminished the appetite for dams — at least among the general public.

So what is an aspiring deadbeat dam owner going to do? The answer, public relations and lots of it to convince the public and politicians that more dams are urgently needed — and at any price (as long as the aspirants don't have to pay).

Example one, California's Proposition 1, which made available up to \$2.7 billion California taxpayer dollars to deadbeat dam applicants. Example two, California's recent drought allowed California's U.S. Senator Feinstein to create and pass the Water Infrastructure Improvements for the Nation Act of 2016 (WIIN). The WIIN was to be an emergency five-year program to kickstart some of the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation hoped-for dams — and provide grants and loans to other aspiring non-federal dam-builders.

Well, Reclamation has been doing its best to kick, but so far their best California success has been pushing the illegal Shasta Dam raise forward, where they've scheduled themselves to begin construction by late this year or early the next — and drawn some lawsuits for their trouble.

That one-two punch of Prop 1 and the WIIN has created quite a bit of work for river lovers, but at least both programs sort of had end dates. It was a crushing blow, therefore, when Senator Feinstein and her coauthors on June 20, 2019, introduced the "Drought Resiliency and Water Supply Infrastructure Act" (DRWSIA) (*Doctor Wisia to insiders*). If passed, it would make the WIIN dam storage programs a permanent part of Reclamation Law. Ouch.

DRWSIA adds canals to the WIIN/DRWSIA program and increases the authorized WIIN/DRWSIA funding accounts to more than a billion dollars, building the expectation that the Congress will keep increasing this fund as the dam and canal builders spend the taxpayer money in it. Additionally, it sets up Reclamation to join the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which in 2018 was tasked by Congress and the President to be a federal banker with the mission of loaning money out for these projects. That one hurt, and adding a Reclamation bank to the mix will hurt too. I betcha that the Congress wants these bankers to be soft touches too.

Just as alarmingly, DRWSIA puts the Secretary of the Interior in the driver's seat on what pet projects he chooses to build. That's Westlands' man in Interior, Secretary of the Interior David Bernhardt. In the new order, the Congressional authorizing committees would no longer authorize projects but merely the pot of money the appropriations committees can fill with taxpayer cash for these projects. The appropriations committees' next job would be to appropriate a dollar or more to specific dam or canal projects, which then "authorizes" the Secretary to spend any amount of money from this "slush fund" on any WIIN/DRWSIA project that has ever received appropriations by name.

Wow! Deadbeat dam heaven, tempered only by some — no-doubt to the dam-building aspirants — pesky WIIN/DRWSIA language about not violating environmental laws and preempting state laws. Of course, with the WIIN/DRWSIA fiscal incentives and streamlining of Congressional processes, the pressure will be on to find ways around these pesky provisions of law.

For those who want to dig deeper I've prepared a twelve-page focusing on the DRWSIA storage program. Important memo, though. It is a tough read, but so is the legislation, upsetting the Congressional controls over federal water programs that have been in place for a third of a century. If this sucker passes, our lives and the lives of western rivers will not be the same. If you thought the last thirty years was tough, it can get worse, much worse.

<https://www.friendsoftheriver.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/FOR-memo-on-selected-DRWSIA-provisions.pdf>

Well, you all know the drill. Spread the word that this is not good. Talk to reporters and commentators and people who can influence matters. House and Senators will have to vote on this, so do not be shy about contacting them. If you don't know who your House of Representatives member is or who your U.S. Senators are, well, that is what Google was invented for. The bill number is S. 1932, ironic given that the Great Depression kicked off the last U.S. dam-building era. Go get 'em.