

Encyclopedia of Politics of the American West

Army Corps of Engineers, U.S.

Contributors: Steven L. Danver

Print Pub. Date: 2013

Online Pub. Date: May 21, 2013

Print ISBN: 9781608719099

Online ISBN: 9781452276076

DOI: 10.4135/9781452276076

Print pages: 183-184

This PDF has been generated from SAGE knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

10.4135/9781452276076.n55

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) has been an extremely influential institution in American military and scientific history and has had enduring national and global impact. The Corps' origins date to its congressional establishment (Pub. L. 7–70) on March 16, 1802, and assignment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. This organization was called the Corps of Topographical Engineers from 1838 to 1863, and its early responsibilities included building coastal fortifications, constructing canals, surveying roads, and exploring and documenting the continually growing and westward-expanding geographic boundaries of the United States, including with the Pacific Railroad Survey of the 1850s.

Subsequent decades would see the Corps involved in a number of different projects affecting the West. These included building Pacific Coast fortifications, such as the Presidio in San Francisco and Fort DeRussy and Hickam Field in Hawai'i, along with numerous hydropower projects as the twentieth century progressed. Examples of these hydroelectric projects include the Pick-Sloan Missouri River project and dams on the Columbia and Snake rivers, including the Bonneville and Ice Harbor dams.

The Corps serves as a major provider of recreational activities and carries out programs involving cultural archeology and environmental management and restoration at sites it manages. Examples of these recreational facilities include Arizona's Painted Rock Dam, California's Carbon Canyon Dam, Montana's Fort Peck Dam, and Oregon's Bonneville Lock and Dam.

Providing disaster relief support is another long-standing Corps activity. It provided public assistance after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1964 Anchorage earthquake, Alaska's 1989 *Exxon Valdez* oil spill, and California's Loma Prieta earthquake that same year. The 1950 Federal Disaster Relief Act (Pub. L. 81–875) assigned the Corps responsibility for managing federal flood response activities until the 1988 transfer of these responsibilities to the Federal Emergency Management Administration, or FEMA (Pub. L. 100–70).

The Corps has a significant physical footprint in the West as evidenced by the aforementioned dams and fortifications and numerous research centers and offices.

Examples of these include a hydraulic engineering center in Davis, California, and regional offices in Albuquerque, New Mexico; Anchorage, Alaska; Kansas City, Missouri; Omaha, Nebraska; Portland, Oregon; Sacramento, California; San Francisco, California; Seattle, Washington; and Walla Walla, [p. 183 ↓] Washington. All of these facilities have been located in the West due to that region's need for dependable access to hydroelectric energy, the increasing U.S. military presence in the western United States in conjunction with growing national military power and expanding geopolitical interests in the Asia-Pacific region, and the effective use of congressional earmarks by western congressional representatives desirous of promoting economic development and governmental policymaking in their states and districts.

Corps accomplishments include being praised for technical skill and providing hydroelectric power to numerous areas of the West while also providing regular employment to highly skilled labor in this region. At the same time, the Corps has been criticized for disrupting ecological activity, such as salmon migration, due to dam construction and destroying historical artifacts from American Indian and other western demographic settlements.

The Corps made a FY 2012 congressional budget request of \$4.631 million in February 2011 with proposals for projects in all fifty states covering areas such as flood control, navigation, hydropower, aquatic ecosystem restoration, recreation, emergency management, and water supply. Examples of projects for which the Corps has requested congressional funding include \$525,000 for enhancing Channel Islands Harbor, California, navigation; \$1,162,000 for Cherry Lake, Colorado, environmental and recreational enhancement; and \$1,312,000 for a flood control study of the Upper River Rio Grande River Operations Model in New Mexico.

Emerging issues confronting this agency include maintaining and replacing aging infrastructure, balancing economic development and environmental concerns, and conducting all of its activities in a time of protracted federal budget deficits and economic volatility that may see the Corps' budget and activities reduced significantly. This agency has played and will continue playing a significant role in the West's economic, environmental, and political development, but the exact extent and nature of this role remain uncertain due to ongoing national economic problems.

Albert T. Chapman

10.4135/9781452276076.n55

See also

Further Readings

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