

Water bill provides key relief for Oregon coast

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While much of the state was paying attention to the COVID-19 relief package that passed Congress on Monday, Congressman Peter DeFazio was celebrating another win.

DeFazio, who serves as the chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, said the spending bill that also passed was a big win for the nation's coastal communities. Included in the package was the Water Resources Development Act of 2020, which fully funds harbor maintenance.

"This is a tremendous victory for Oregon's coastal communities," DeFazio said. "For decades, I have fought to unlock the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund and ensure that funds already collected for harbor maintenance are fully utilized to keep our local ports dredged and jetties maintained. Finally, WRDA 2020 fulfills that goal. With this fix, our ports and harbors will have the resources they so desperately need, all without raising taxes or adding a penny to the deficit. My bipartisan bill, approved by both the House and the Senate, will create and sustain jobs on the coast, make conditions safer for Oregon's commercial fishing and recreation industries and boost our state and national economic competitiveness."

DeFazio explained Congress passed a small tax while Ronald Reagan was president to fund harbor maintenance. But over the last decade, Congress has withheld some of that money, which accumulated to \$10 billion.

When the spending bill passed, the money was unlocked and will be spent over the next decade. DeFazio said beginning in 2021, \$500 million in extra funding will be released every year, with the number climbing to \$1 billion in the sixth year.

“By unlocking the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund, my legislation will ultimately provide up to \$3 billion annually for port maintenance around the country and right here in Oregon,” he said. “I also successfully pushed for a 50 percent increase in funding for small harbors, like the Port of Gold Beach and the Port of Siuslaw, and for a provision that allows harbor maintenance funds to be seamlessly spent on the maintenance of adjacent marinas. This funding will be put to immediate use paying for planned projects such as the Coos Bay North Jetty rehabilitation and maintenance dredging along the coast.”

DeFazio said the Water Resources Development Act twice passed the House unanimously, but the Senate refused to take it up for consideration. That left no choice but to attach it to the spending bill that was approved by Congress on Monday.

DeFazio said the additional funding will help offset years of deferred maintenance at ports and harbors across Oregon and the nation.

“This is going to the big,” he said. “The North Jetty at Coos Bay has needed repairs for a long time. When jetties start to go, they go quickly. This assistance will help us go forward with the North Jetty repair.”

DeFazio also pointed to a dredging project at the Gold Beach harbor as much needed. He said so much gravel has washed into the harbor that the Coast Guard had to remove its boat from the area. Most boats can only enter and exit at high tides due to the built-up silt. With the funding, not only can the harbor be dredged, but work can be done upriver to keep rocks from flowing in for several years.

At Port Orford, the funding will help reconfigure the jetty or put in a permanent dredging system.

“It’s really good for coastal communities,” he said. “We’ve got to dredge these. We lose people on the harbor bars up and down the coast every year.”

DeFazio said he also got funding for the Coast Guard attached to the spending bill. The legislation will fully fund the Coast Guard and will keep an air station in Newport that was in danger of closing.

While DeFazio said he would have preferred to pass the legislation independently, he was forced to attach it to the spending bill when the Senate refused to consider it. The \$10 billion surplus will help make repairs and finish dredging projects at all the harbors across the nation over the next decade, the congressman said.

COVID-19 relief

DeFazio said the package that was approved by Congress was not perfect, but it was nice to see something done.

“It is not as much as I would have liked,” he said. “This got restarted by a bipartisan group in the House and I weighed in and said, ‘Hey, this may not be what we like, but we have to do something.’”

DeFazio said even the imperfect package will help Oregon residents. He said 100,000 Oregonians who would have lost unemployment this month will continue to receive it. He also said federal money will go to tenants and landlords to stop evictions,⁸ and money would go to small businesses that need it most.

“That should provide particular relief to restaurants, gyms and other small businesses that have been impacted by coronavirus restraints,” DeFazio said.

While DeFazio has been spending most of his time in Oregon to limit travel during the pandemic, he said he would return to Washington D.C. early in the new year. He will be sworn in for a new term Jan. 3 and will take part in the Electoral College vote Jan. 6. DeFazio said he expects some Republicans to protest the results but was confident nothing would change.

“They could drag it out for a few days, but the result is preordained,” he said. “This craziness has got to stop at some point and we can get back to the business of helping the country.”

DeFazio said he anticipates the new Congress will take up more COVID relief discussions, but the end result is uncertain.

“There’s a lot of room for improvement,” he said.