

## Statement on Signing the Water Resources Development Act of 1996 October 12, 1996

Today I am signing into law S. 640, the "Water Resources Development Act of 1996," which authorizes water resources development projects and programs in support of the Department of the Army's Civil Works mission.

I am very pleased that the Congress has passed this important legislation. It represents the culmination of a 4-year effort on the part of the Administration and the Congress to enact legislation to preserve and develop water infrastructure needs critical to the Nation's safety, environment, and economic security. It will serve to improve the Nation's water-related infrastructure, create new jobs for Americans, and encourage both economic growth and environmental restoration and protection.

This bill represents another important step forward for the Florida Everglades—one of America's richest treasures. Three years ago, my Administration made the Everglades one of our highest environmental priorities, establishing a special task force to coordinate Federal activities in the area. In February of this year, the Vice President announced our comprehensive program to restore the Florida Everglades. Several weeks later, I signed a Farm Bill that provided a \$200 million downpayment on Everglades restoration; it was sponsored by the Florida delegation with support from Republican and Democratic leaders in the Congress. I called on the Congress again to enact our comprehensive Everglades restoration plan.

This legislation enacts the majority of that plan, establishing the Everglades and South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Program. It directs the Secretary of the Army to work in partnership with various State and Federal agencies participating in the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force to coordinate a long-term restoration effort. It authorizes a number of projects to restore and protect the South Florida ecosystem.

After decades of decline in the Everglades, the people of South Florida and the Nation should take great pride in the steps we have taken together to bring them back. Restoration will take many years of hard work and cooperation, but we know we are on the right track.

Apart from the Everglades provisions, this legislation also includes revisions to cost sharing, which require non-Federal interests to provide a minimum of 35 percent of the costs of both flood control projects and environmental protection and restoration projects authorized in the future. I would have preferred that the non-Federal share be increased to 50 percent and that the new cost sharing apply to projects authorized in this bill. Nevertheless, the changes here represent a significant first step toward greater non-Federal participation in key water resource projects of the future. These changes also represent recognition of the need for non-Federal beneficiaries to share more fully in the cost of such projects in these times of Federal fiscal constraints. Flood control cost-sharing provisions also require the non-Federal project sponsors to develop flood management plans that will help reduce the potential for future flood damages.

I am concerned about the potential overall Federal cost of the bill. Under existing budget constraints, many projects and initiatives authorized by this bill cannot be funded within a reasonable timeframe. Thus, such authorizations may raise unrealistic expectations for non-Federal sponsors who expect timely project initiation and completion. I am also concerned about certain provisions of the bill that assign responsibilities to the Federal Government that more appropriately belong to State and local governments or the private sector, that are inconsistent with established cost-sharing rules, or that authorize projects that are not economically justified.

On balance though, this is important legislation that will not only help save the Everglades, but also promote responsible water resources projects and programs. I appreciate the diligent efforts of all involved to produce a bill that continues the vital role of the Army Corps of Engineers in building and maintaining a strong water resources program. This legislation will continue and in many ways strengthen the Federal/non-Federal partnership principles started in 1986. It will also allow the Army Corps of Engineers to maintain an orderly program for

the construction of productive water resources projects.

WILLIAM J. CLINTON

The White House,  
October 12, 1996.

NOTE: S. 640, approved October 12, was assigned Public Law No. 104-303. This statement was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on October 14.

## Remarks on Signing the Wildfire Suppression Aircraft Transfer Act of 1996 and an Exchange With Reporters in Albuquerque *October 14, 1996*

*The President.* Thank you, Senator Bingaman and Congressman Richardson. I want to thank the representatives of New Mexico's firefighting community here from the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the volunteer firefighters, the New Mexico State forestry office. And of course, we've got some folks from the Albuquerque Fire Department over there, as well.

I'm delighted to be staying here for the next few days. As you look around New Mexico you can't help being awestruck by the awesome, the breathtaking natural beauty of this State and of the entire West, the deserts, the mountains, the play of light and color. We have to do everything we can to protect the treasures of New Mexico. The beauty we see here and, indeed, throughout the West is very deep, but it's also fragile. We know that wildfires can ravage the landscape, threaten people, devastate homes and farms and businesses.

This has been the worst year for wildfires in nearly four decades. I think I need to emphasize that because that is the importance of the legislation we signed today and the efforts that these firefighters and those whom they represent have made—the worst year in almost 40 years. The brave men and women who are with us today and the thousands of their colleagues put their lives on the line to protect their fellow citizens, our natural environment, as they battle these blazes. We owe them our thanks, and we should be deeply grateful that during this past year, despite the huge rash of wildfires, not a single firefighter lost his or her life in a wildfire. That's because their training, their dedication, and because of the equipment that they have been provided.

We have to make sure that they have the very best possible equipment at their disposal. We can't tolerate a situation where any firefighter is unable to protect the public or themselves because of a lack of equipment, especially the air tankers that can muster such force and power to fight fires.

The legislation I have just signed will help these and other firefighters to do a better job with more safety, especially when they're faced with wildfires. Today, the Forest Service and other agencies rely on an aging and shrinking fleet of 39 air tankers to fight fires throughout our Nation. With this measure, we allow the Department of Defense to sell excess military aircraft to private contractors for conversion into air tankers that then can be leased to our Government to drench the fires from the sky.

This is a public-private partnership in the best sense, providing a vital service to the American public and its safety, using the skills and resources of the private sector to maintain a full fleet of modern air tankers for use by the Forest Service. It's especially fitting that this becomes law at the end of National Fire Prevention Week, a time we honor fallen firefighters and redouble our own efforts to be prudent and prevent fires from happening in the first place.

Again, I want to thank those brave men and women who are here with me today. I thank Senator Bingaman for his leadership. I thank Congressman Richardson, whose district has been especially affected. I'd also like to thank Senators Kempthorne and Craig for what they did and Senator Lott for making it possible for us to bring up this bill late in the congressional session and get it passed eventually in both Houses on a voice vote. This was a good thing for America, and I was glad to sign the bill.