

# Municipal Water Leader

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**Pioneering New Approaches to Sustainability:  
A Conversation With Metropolitan Water Reclamation  
District of Greater Chicago's David St. Pierre**

# Bob Dawson Reflects on the Water Resources Development Act 1986 at 30

**R**obert K. Dawson came to Washington from Alabama in the 1970s to work for Congressman Jack Edwards. He played football on a scholarship at Tulane University, where he earned a bachelor of science degree. He later earned a juris doctor degree at Samford University. Mr. Dawson became Congressman Edwards' legislative director, and Congressman Bob Jones, chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, appointed him the committee administrator, which is the equivalent of today's chief of staff.

In 1981, Mr. Dawson joined the Reagan administration as deputy assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works. The assistant secretary was California water legend William Gianelli. When Mr. Gianelli left the administration, Mr. Dawson was promoted to assistant secretary. He was in that job when the Water Resources Development Act (WRDA) of 1986 was enacted and signed into law.

After his successful stint as assistant secretary, President Ronald Reagan promoted Mr. Dawson to associate director of the Office of Management and Budget, where he oversaw budget and policy for about one-fourth of the federal budget, including the U.S. Departments of Agriculture, Energy, and the Interior; the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency; and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

After leaving government at the end of the Reagan administration, Mr. Dawson founded the Dawson & Associates government relations firm, which today occupies a place on the A list of Washington firms. Dawson & Associates offers a wide array of services, including land use approval, flood risk management, energy permitting, surface transportation permitting, superfund remediation, federal contracting, natural resources permitting, urban river restoration, and waterways and marine transportation. Dawson & Associates has an impressive set of accomplishments, including Clean Water Act permitting, Endangered Species Act mitigation, congressional appropriations and authorizations, federal waterway policy advocacy, and Everglades restoration. Mr. Dawson is one of America's most respected water resources professionals.

On August 5, 2016, at a gala honoring achievement in the engineering community, Lieutenant General Todd Semonite, Commanding General of the Army Corps of Engineers, presented Mr. Dawson with the 2016 Gold de Fleury Medal. This is the highest award given by the Army Engineer Regiment.

Mr. Dawson joined Municipal Water Leader's writer, Valentina Valenta, for a conversation recalling his role in the landmark WRDA 1986 on the 30th anniversary of its enactment.



Bob Dawson speaking with *Municipal Water Leader's* writer, Valentina Valenta, about the history and landmark reforms of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986. (Photo courtesy of Dawson & Associates)



President Ronald Reagan, surrounded by congressional sponsors, including Senator Lloyd Bentsen, Congresswoman Helen Bentley, Senator Pete Domenici, and Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works Bob Dawson, (fourth from right), signing the Water Resources Development Act 1986. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)

**Valentina Valenta:** How would you sum up President Reagan's policy agenda and vision for a revitalized federal water resources program and a revolutionary WRDA? I understand it went beyond cost sharing and financing reform.

**Bob Dawson:** When President Reagan came to Washington, DC, he understood the value of water projects. During his time as governor of the state of California, he had engineered, with the help of Bill Gianelli, director of the California Department of Water Resources (DWR) from 1967–1973, the now-famous State Water Project that moves water from Northern California to Southern California. President Reagan knew the importance of water resources in growing the national economy and maintaining an edge in international competitiveness. The foundation for support was good, and it was not only about financing but also creating jobs and prosperity. President Reagan brought Mr. Gianelli to Washington to run the Corps of Engineers. Mr. Gianelli was the administration's point man on reforms for WRDA 1986. President Reagan and Mr. Gianelli brought a strong commitment to economic development in California with them to Washington, DC.

**Valentina Valenta:** I understand that WRDA 1986 ushered in the current Corps policy of the federal–local project sponsor cost-share model. How did financing for Corps projects operate prior to the Reagan administration?

**Bob Dawson:** Prior to WRDA 1986, cost sharing for the development of Corps projects did not exist. Cost sharing was stimulated by budget shortages, which President Carter emphasized as well as his environmental hit list, which indicated to those who favored water projects that they needed to do something different. Cost sharing

was a good way to prove the worth of a project.

It was actually hard to get the bill passed, but not because of any perceived flaws in the bill. Some members of Congress and stakeholders had trouble accepting the cost-share reforms in WRDA 1986. The sponsors had to make tough choices. We also hadn't seen a WRDA passed in 10 years, and WRDA 1986 was very different. The sponsors had to put money toward their water infrastructure study as well as construction. The credibility of Corps of Engineers programs increased dramatically under cost sharing. WRDA 1986 cost \$11.5 billion.

**Valentina Valenta:** Please tell us about the role of Bill Gianelli in the Reagan administration's water policy and WRDA.

**Bob Dawson:** Mr. Gianelli was the father of WRDA 1986 even though he returned to California in 1984. He brought the idea and the courage to implement major financing reform. He essentially said to Congress that a more rigorous study process and a cost-sharing test must be applied. He would say that in hearings, and he made it clear that idea was neither Democrat nor Republican. I give Mr. Gianelli a huge amount of credit for the reforms in WRDA 1986. He had already accomplished similar efforts in California and had the confidence of the White House. We started working on WRDA 1986 in 1981. It took nearly six years from the inception of bill to get it passed. We had a first draft ready from the administration in 1984. President Carter's hit list of water projects had really caused a debate over the value of water projects.

**Valentina Valenta:** How do you think the congressional committees of jurisdiction over water resources view WRDA today?



Lt. Gen. Todd Semonite, commanding general of the Army Corps of Engineers, and Command Sergeant Major Antonio Jones presenting the 2016 Gold Medal de Fleury to Bob Dawson at the 148th Annual Engineer Castle Ball, held in Arlington, Virginia, on August 5, 2016. (U.S. Army photo by Alfredo Barraza)

**Bob Dawson:** The committees may grind their teeth about one provision or another under WRDA 1986, but I believe they would say that the bill gave them something to compete with against social programs and defense projects. WRDA 1986 provided the ticket by saying, “These projects are worthy, prima facie, because the sponsors are willing to pay.” So I think they would say that it was really good that we got cost sharing done. There hadn’t been a WRDA since 1976. Mr. Gianelli and I saw that the time was right to make major changes and give the program a firmness that it just didn’t have before. The Office of Management and Budget respected that.

**Valentina Valenta:** A political science theory says that there was an iron triangle underlying support for Corps projects: The Corps, Congress, and the project beneficiaries. Please tell us how the administration pursued its WRDA policy reforms with the elements of the triangle.

**Bob Dawson:** The Corps is a wonderful institution and it is used to following orders as part of the military. So the Corps was receptive to a change if articulated well. The reforms under WRDA 1986 would never have occurred had the Corps not traveled around the country a year prior to the bill’s passage getting cost-sharing agreements signed with project sponsors. The Corps was able to sell the bill by saying, “If you want to be one of the early projects, sign here.” Without that cooperation, WRDA 1986 would not have happened. Some of the former leaders of the Corps explained to the members why WRDA was good for the country. One of the former chiefs, Jack Morris, a legend, had worked quite a bit with President Carter. Fred Clarke, another ex-chief, had also gone to the Hill to talk about the importance of reforms.

President Carter had been unable to get WRDA passed. That made Congress more willing to accept some changes. Some members of Congress would call and say they were with us, but they wanted an exception. One member of Congress at the time approached me and agreed to support the bill only if I could manage to include a very expensive project that had a very negative cost-benefit ratio. I knew that if I gave him any hope of doing that, the bill would be dead. Every member would have expected his own special project to be in the bill. WRDA 1986 presented a great opportunity to get projects back on a regular cycle. Members knew the competitive nature of the appropriations process would only get worse.

Water resources organizations and trade associations were also very supportive. They understood that there would be no bill unless reforms, such as cost sharing, were included. Some of these groups even testified in support of the changes.

Mr. Gianelli knew how to sell more than just a project. He could sell a vision and pointed to his success in getting the State Water Project online. That made my job in gathering support for the bill in the halls of Congress easier.

**Valentina Valenta:** You were the assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works when the bill finally moved and passed. Starting with how you came to the job, please tell us how this major event came together. Besides you, who were the key players that carried the effort down the stretch?

**Bob Dawson:** I came to Washington as Jack Edwards’ legislative assistant. After some time, I was packing up to leave to go back to Alabama to practice law when Congressman Bob Jones, chairman of the Public Works and Transportation Committee, called me into his office. I assumed he thought I was going home to run against him, and he wanted to talk me out of it. Instead, he offered me the staff director position on the full committee, which was an incredible opportunity for a 26 year old. So I went home and unpacked the boxes. I worked under three Democrats, and I really bonded with them. In those days, it was not unusual to work as a staffer for both Democrats and Republicans in Congress. My experience on the committee really helped me with WRDA 1986.

In 1981, Congressman Edwards received a call from President Reagan. Congressman Edwards called me and asked if I would like to work in the assistant secretary of Army Corps’ office as Mr. Gianelli’s deputy. I was certainly interested. I learned a tremendous amount from Mr. Gianelli during his three years at the helm. He was a manager, an administrator, and an engineer, and he knew water programs better than anyone in the business.

The three people who pushed WRDA 1986 over the finish line were Bill Gianelli, Senator Jim Abdnor, (who sadly lost his election that year because he stayed in Washington, DC, to get the bill passed rather than returning to his state to campaign), and Chairman Bob Roe.

**Valentina Valenta:** Most historians of the Corps, amateur as well as professional, cite WRDA 1986 as the beginning of the current era of water resources at the Corps. What did the act do, why was it so important, and why does it continue to be so important?

**Bob Dawson:** WRDA 1986 proved that the beneficiaries were willing and able to pay. The ongoing budget for the Corps, which is supported by the White House and the Congress, demonstrates that the federal government understands the value of our nation’s water projects. The Corps authorization committees have now committed to getting WRDA done every two years. That shows the importance and priority of the Corps programs, and it also gives us a forum to adjust the policy. We are still learning from WRDA 1986.

**Valentina Valenta:** We are in a presidential election year, and Washington, DC, is embroiled in campaigning and politicking. Some members of Congress may be facing a lot of criticism from their constituents for their votes on costly

bills. They may be asking themselves why they should support another WRDA bill so soon after the last one was passed, especially if they don't have any projects specific to their districts included in the bill.

**Bob Dawson:** I would tell them that we have to think on a national scale. It really is a competitive world out there, and there are a lot of countries that want to emerge from the fight economically stronger than the United States. We have to have better ports, better inland waterways, and better flood protection that doesn't wipe out cities like New Orleans.

**Valentina Valenta:** What were some of the most important projects that originated under WRDA 1986?

**Bob Dawson:** The ports were a highly visible part of the process, especially Baltimore, New York, and Norfolk. In fact, right before the bill was either going to get passed or not, I asked Mr. Bory Steinberg, a great Corps of Engineers careerist, to get a cost-sharing agreement signed with Norfolk and Baltimore. Mr. Steinberg undertook shuttle diplomacy and got them both to sign the new cost-sharing agreements based on the terms of WRDA 1986. Later on, those ports were clearly beneficial to the nation, not only to the cities where the ports were located.

The Everglades and the environment were certainly part of the WRDA 1986 legacy. WRDA 1986 created the process for federal-state negotiations and cost-sharing that the Everglades Restoration Project was born out of. Speaking of the environment, the first environmental authority or mission provided to the Corps was in WRDA 1986, section 1135.

It is interesting that many of the environmental groups who opposed my confirmation helped get the bill passed. My nomination took over a year. There were four hearings. I was fortunate to have a great supporter, Senator Howell Heflin from Alabama, who was a Democrat. In addition, Senator Phil Gramm from Texas came into one of my hearings and threatened to hold up any of the bills that my opposition was promoting if they didn't confirm me immediately. That said, environmentalists could see that WRDA 1986 would enable smaller projects and environmental reforms that wouldn't happen without the cost-share formula. Though the environmental groups didn't support my initial confirmation, they became great allies on the bill.

You can't take anything personally in Washington, DC. Your detractors one day can be your great supporters the next. For me, though, rather than one project standing out, the most important thing to come out of WRDA 1986 was the idea that a lot of work, jobs, and competitiveness for the nation occurred because of the bill's reforms. That was the most important part of the measure.

**Valentina Valenta:** The Water Resources and Reform Development Act of 2014 dealt with some unusual issues, including the disputes among Alabama, Florida, and Georgia and over the apportionment of their river basins. Do you believe that WRDA is the right place to resolve the Southeast's water wars?

**Bob Dawson:** WRDA certainly provides a debate point for issues of interstate conflict, but there can't be a resolution in the bill because somebody has to lose in those water wars. The best hope, I think, is for the three governors to come together and try to reach an agreement.

**Valentina Valenta:** Please share with our readers some of the great friendships you developed during your work on WRDA 1986.

**Bob Dawson:** Bill Gianelli is a great friend. I got to know Senator Jim Abdnor quite well. The chief of engineers at the time was Vald Heiberg, and he became a great friend. He passed away. Those battle station experiences provided great bonding experiences. Ed Dickey was at the Army, and he was a shining light. He has a great mind. Mr. Dickey was the translator of economic theories—a great practitioner of that art. He is a stalwart colleague and friend. Mr. Dickey is a part of my firm now.

I also developed a great working relationship with the Office of Management and Budget. Don Crable, another person who worked on WRDA 1986 is legendary in the world of water projects. Those friendships were intensified if not totally attributable to the work we did in getting WRDA 1986 signed into law.

**Valentina Valenta:** Thirty years later, WRDA 1986 continues to be the framework for the Civil Works program. Events seldom stand still. Perhaps one of the most discussed issues today is the reality that sufficient federal money is unlikely to be found to build all the projects that nonfederal sponsors have supported with a funding commitment and which have been authorized for implementation. What are the possibilities for meeting this challenge as we look toward the future?

**Bob Dawson:** I think the future is very bright. If you look at the president's budget for the Corps, it's a large amount of money. However, proponents have to do a better job of convincing the power structure that these programs are really good and are better than certain social or defense programs. Hill leadership in the committees of jurisdiction is strong.

The Corps leadership is also great. However, constituencies and local sponsors, including individuals and local counties, need to push their projects with the committees, the Corps, and even the Office of Management and Budget. Their engagement truly matters.