A Watershed Effort – The 20th Anniversary of the Watershed Rehabilitation Act

Responding to the Alarm of Aging Infrastructure:
The Behind-the Scenes Story of How One Federal Agency Engaged with
Partners and Congress to Enact the Watershed Rehabilitation Act of 2000

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America’s professional engineers know how to get things done. From the nation’s bridges and roads, to flood control and irrigation projects, they apply science on the cutting edge and put their names on the line daily to ensure that sound designs mean sound projects on the landscape. But what if that isn’t enough? What happens when crumbling and aging infrastructure has met its design life? What happens when new threats to American life, property, and prosperity emerge – threats that only engineers recognize, and that the public seems either unaware of or reticent address? Is it the responsibility of engineers to do more?

As the Watershed Rehabilitation Act of 2000 marks it’s twentieth year since enactment, this paper outlines how that effort came together. The focus of this paper is on the unique role that engineers and federal bureaucrats played in extending beyond their traditional role as civil servants into the realm of public policy advocacy. It explores how executive branch resources can empower and amplify the efforts and voices of local advocacy organizations, including Conservation Districts and local watershed advocates. This paper shares the story of how a few engineers, public officials, and one junior Member of Congress stepped out of their comfort zone – to sound an alarm, build a coalition and orchestrate one of the first widespread federal efforts to rehabilitate major non-federal public works since the New Deal.