



THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN AUTHORIZATIONS AND APPROPRIATIONS

There is an important distinction in Congress between authorizations and appropriations. Any money spent by the Federal government must first be **authorized** by Congress. This authorization comes in the form of legislation which usually originates from the committee that has jurisdiction over the issue to be authorized. The Water Resources Development Act, which authorizes spending on projects to improve coastal communities along America's lakes, oceans and rivers, must be approved by the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works.

Most congressional committees have the power to authorize the expenditure of Federal funds except the House and Senate Appropriations Committees and the Budget Committees of Congress. Some authorization bills are considered by Congress each year, while others are considered every two to three (or more) years.

However, authorizing money to be spent does not permit the expenditure of a single dollar. It merely says that Congress approves a project or a program that has a certain cost attached to it. The actual allocation of that money to a particular government agency requires an **appropriation**. For example, Congress approved the interstate highway system in the Federal Highway Act of 1944. However, the money for many of these projects was not actually appropriated until 1956 (or later).

Appropriations originate in thirteen appropriations bills that are approved by the House and Senate Appropriations Committees. Thus, each of these committees has 12 subcommittees. Within guidelines set annually by the Congressional Budget Resolution (assuming one is passed) and more specific figures set thereafter by the full House and Senate Appropriations Committees, these subcommittees produce appropriations bills which are then approved by the full Appropriations Committee. By precedent, the House usually acts first on each appropriations bill. After passage in the House, each respective appropriations bill moves to the Senate, where it goes through committee consideration and a vote on the Senate floor.

Despite the fact that using appropriations bills as a legislative vehicle to make policy is against the rules of Congress, what is known as **legislating on an appropriations bill** occurs quite frequently.