

# Corps of Engineers Civil Works Studies

***Reconnaissance Study.*** The first step in a navigation improvement project is a “reconnaissance study,” preliminary in nature, to determine whether the project has enough merit to warrant a full feasibility study. Such studies are fully funded by the Federal government, cost about \$100,000, and take a year or two (33 USC 2282(b)).

The essential element of a reconnaissance study is the “section 905(b) analysis,” which responds to the requirements of section 905(b) of the Water Resources Development Act of 1986. That involves preliminary analysis of the costs and potential benefits to determine whether there is a “Federal interest” in proceeding to the next phase, the feasibility phase. Should such a determination be made, the additional element is the design of a project management plan for the next step, feasibility study.

***Feasibility Study.*** A feasibility study is a comprehensive study of the economic and environmental aspects of the project, to determine whether and how the project should be constructed. Such studies cost many millions of dollars and take the better part of a decade (33 USC 2282(a)). Costs would be shared equally between the Federal government and a “non-Federal sponsor.” In the case of channel dredging projects, the usual non-Federal sponsor would be the port authority or other agency that operates the port facilities that would be served.

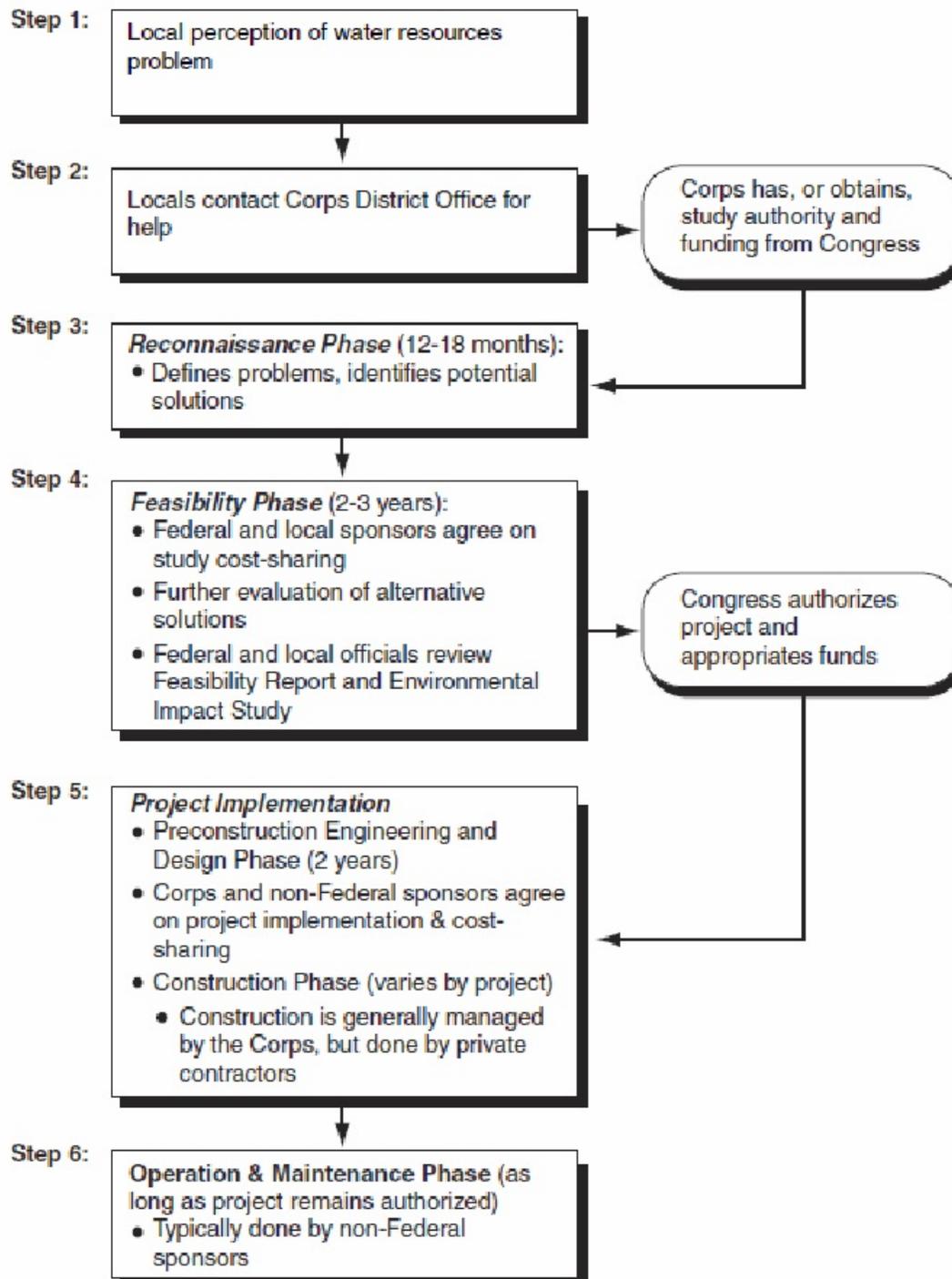
The usual practice of the Corps in these studies is separate the project into two parts, the feasibility analysis and the environmental impact statement. The feasibility analysis is a quantitative exercise, which involves estimation and comparison of benefits and costs over the life of the project, assumed to be fifty years. Environmental effects are taken into account only in the cost of mitigation measures.

The environmental part of the study would be an “environmental impact statement” prepared according to the National Environmental Policy Act. The Corps takes a compliance approach; legal requirements are determined and the project is measured against those requirements. If minimum standards are met, that is considered sufficient.

***General Reevaluation Report.*** Once a project is underway, Corps regulations contemplate post-authorization studies “if a significant period of time has elapsed or conditions have changed since the feasibility study was completed.” ER 1105-2-100, section 4.1b. Such a study may be a limited reevaluation or a general reevaluation: “reanalysis of a previously completed study, using current planning criteria and policies, which is required due to changed conditions and/or assumptions. The results may affirm the previous plan; reformulate and modify it, as appropriate; or find that no plan is currently justified.”

A General Reevaluation Report was begun for the current Wilmington Harbor Project in 2005 but suspended in 2009. The project itself is not yet complete. The current study for the Savannah Harbor Improvement Project is being handled as a General Reevaluation Report.

**Figure 1: Major Steps in Developing a Civil Works Project**



Source: GAO presentation of Corps data.