

Hopped up on pork

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

The pork-busters who work for Citizens Against Government Waste were against earmarks back in the mid-1980s, before being against earmarks was cool.

A familiar pattern emerged: The fiscal watchdog organization's annual spring release of its "Pig Book" would result in a flurry of news stories about the more egregious pork barrel projects in the federal budget. Lawmakers would weather the storm and then go back to doing what they did before: slipping ever more "earmarked" spending projects into spending bills without debate or oversight.

Earmarks began to be a cause celebre in the fall of 2005 when the nation discovered the proposed \$315 million Gravina Island Bridge connecting Ketchikan, Alaska, to the island where its airport is located. Rep. Don Young, R-Alaska, had slipped a \$231 million earmark into the 2005 Transportation Bill to help pay for the project, which quickly became known as "The Bridge to Nowhere."

Adding to the furor was the fact that earmark spending had exploded during the years that Republicans, the one-time party of fiscal conservatism, controlled both houses of Congress. Democrats got control in 2006 in part because of promises - still unkept in the Senate - to reform earmark spending.

As a result of all this, the release this week of the Citizens Against Government Waste's 2008 "Pig Book" caused hardly a stir. Its key findings already had been reported:

- In fiscal year 2008, Congress stuffed 11,610 projects (the second highest total ever) worth \$17.2 billion into the 12 appropriations bills.

- That is a 337 percent increase over the 2,658 projects in fiscal year 2007 and a 30 percent increase over the \$13.2 billion total in fiscal year 2007.

- Alaska led the nation with \$556 in pork per capita (\$380 million total), followed by Hawaii with \$221 (\$283 million) and North Dakota with \$208 (\$133 million).

The big difference this year is that Congress is making an attempt, albeit grudgingly, at reform: It might not be able to cut earmark spending, but at least it can make the process more transparent. The House already has imposed new rules governing disclosure, but the Senate has been reluctant. Three weeks ago, 46 Democratic senators joined 25 Republicans to defeat a proposed one-year moratorium on earmarks.

This week, though, Senate Republicans adopted a plan that could move the Senate a little closer to earmark reform. It wouldn't ban earmarks, but it would ban earmarked projects from being slipped secretly into spending bills and committee reports. That would enable opponents to challenge them. Senate Republicans also want to require that senators post on their Web sites a list of their requested earmarks, along with a justification for each request.

That would be progress. But the 48 GOP senators still would need substantial support from Democrats to enact the rules change. Only six Democratic senators - including the party's two presidential candidates, Barack Obama of Illinois and Hillary Clinton of New York - voted in favor of the earmark moratorium three weeks ago.

Transparency and full disclosure make more sense than a full moratorium. As we've noted before, often the problem with earmarks is not so much the projects themselves, but with the secrecy involved. Even the most egregious project in the "Pig Book" can be defended - well, at least explained.

Of the earmarks noted in the new "Pig Book," we are drawn to a \$462,000 item for hops research, sponsored by several members of Congress from the Pacific Northwest, where the fragrant flowers used in brewing beer are grown. It turns out there's actually a severe hops shortage in the United States. Given the number of beer drinkers in the nation, if the hops earmark comes to vote, we like its chances.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch â€“ CNS.

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