

Senate approves Wyden's plan to get rid of "secret holds"; Provision sent to conference committee

by Bend Weekly News Sources

The U.S. Senate last night approved a critical ethics and reform bill, S.1 that includes a provision authored by U.S. Senators Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Chuck Grassley (R-IA) to prohibit a single Senator from blocking legislation or a nominee without revealing his or her identity.

Wyden and Grassley have worked for more than a decade to end the practice of secret holds. Their amendment requiring a Senator who places a hold to make it public within three days was included in the Senate version of lobbying reform legislation.

Most recently, in March 2006, the Senate voted 84-13 on a Wyden-Grassley amendment requiring Senators to announce their opposition to legislation or a nominee in the Congressional Record within three days.

"Americans want their public officials to do their business in public. That's why the United States Senate needs to change the way it does its business," Wyden said. "It ought to do its business in the open. It ought to do its business in a way that will hold Senators accountable. To have that accountability, the Senate needs to end once and for all the practice of secret holds."

"This is a major step forward in our quest to end secret holds. Now, I hope the conferees remember that in the last Congress the Senate passed this provision with 84 votes, and frankly the House should have no say about Senate procedure. Since secret holds only affect the Senate, this matter should be non-negotiable in the conference meetings. Any conference agreement without this provision would be illegitimate," Grassley said. "Transparency in government is what the lobbying and ethics bill is all about. Not only do our colleagues deserve to know about a hold on each others' bills, but our constituents deserve to know what we're doing in our elected positions."

Wyden continued, "The overwhelming majority of our citizens probably have no idea what a secret hold is. If you walk the streets of this country and ask somebody what a hold was in the United States Senate, I don't think you'd get one out of 100 people who would have any idea what you're talking about. They might even think it's a smack down wrestling move they've seen on TV. Or they might think it's a kind of hairspray."

"But the fact of the matter is that a hold here in the Senate can affect the lives of our citizens, and they may never even know about it," Wyden said. "A hold is the ability to block a piece of legislation, block a nomination, from being even discussed on the floor of this body."

Wyden and Grassley emphasized what the change will mean for the Senate. If this change is put in place, no

longer will staff be able to keep secret from Members an objection. No longer will leadership be the only ones to know about an objection. No longer will it be possible for a Senator to be kept in the dark about somebody who has put a hold on something they have worked on for years and years.

Wyden and Grassley added that prohibiting secret holds puts the burden on the person who ought to be held publicly accountable: squarely on the shoulders of an objector. The person who exercises a hold will be identified and colleagues can discuss with that person how to move forward in a bipartisan way. No Senator is going to be stripped of his or her rights. No senator is going to be kept from protecting constituents who have serious concerns about legislation, but with the right to stand up for your views and to object to a piece of legislation comes responsibility, Wyden said.

The legislation now goes to a House-Senate conference committee where differences between the Senate reform bill and the House reform bill will be worked out.

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