Costly plaything

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Calif., long has defended congressional earmarking - the practice by which lawmakers quietly, sometimes secretly, slip pet projects and favored contractors into mammoth spending bills. But he now appears determined to make himself the poster child of egregious earmarks by squandering $63 million on a San Diego firm's failed military jet.

Earmarking abuses cost taxpayers billions of dollars a year in wasteful spending. But they also breed corruption - campaign contributions in exchange for favors - when a lawmaker can work in the shadows to steer tens of millions of dollars to a specific corporation. The troubled DP-2 aircraft, being developed at Hunter's insistence and over the Pentagon's objections by duPont Aerospace, underscores why earmark reform is urgently needed.

By any objective criteria, this discredited project should have been shelved years ago. After nearly two decades of congressional largesse orchestrated by Hunter, who served as Armed Service Committee chairman until the Democrats took control of the House, the DP-2 vertical takeoff jet is nothing more than an expensive plaything, and one that is not even capable of getting safely off the ground. An evaluator for the Air Force, which doesn't want the experimental plane, concluded it was deficient "in virtually all evaluated aspects of the operation." The DP-2, said Rep. Brad Miller, D-N.C., "has never received a positive technical review in more than 20 years. Congress appears to have allowed the DP-2 program to become a hobby, not a serious research project."

Hunter staunchly defends the failed technology and novel engineering being devised by duPont for its plane, a prototype of which sits on a platform at Gillespie Field in El Cajon, Calif. Yet Pentagon contract managers have recorded nothing but an unending series of technical failures by the aircraft, which suffers from fundamental "engineering deficiencies," according to one government report. The blunt-spoken congressman also says there is no connection between his support for the duPont project and the $36,000 in campaign contributions he has received from individuals associated with duPont. We'll take Hunter at his word. But there simply is no argument that the campaign cash creates the appearance of the defense contractor lavishing funds on Hunter in exchange for the congressman's funneling tens of millions of dollars into the unworkable plane. The appearance alone undermines the legislative process and fuels cynicism about Congress as a whole.

Two things are needed now. The first is wholesale reform of earmarks, which must include complete transparency and genuine legislative scrutiny of every spending item inserted into bills by lawmakers. The second is for Congress to turn off the horrendously wasteful DP-2 spending spigot, and the sooner the better.

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