

# Dr. Coburn Launches an Earmark Toolkit

## Media resources, statistics, graphics and other information for battling pork

April 15, 2006 -- "Earmarks" have been in the news a lot lately, but most Americans are not familiar with this inside-the-Beltway phenomenon. And for good reason. If more taxpayers were armed with a full understanding of the shady, undemocratic practice of earmarking, they might just demand an end to it on the spot. Dr. Coburn hopes that's the case and has established this site to empower voters to demand reforms that will place the future quality of life for the next generation above concerns about the next election. This site contains an introduction to earmarks, links to Dr. Coburn's earmark-related hearings, media stories on earmarks, reports by Congressional Research Service and others, oversight letters, legislative and floor action such as bills and amendments, and press releases.

### **INTRODUCTION TO EARMARKS: THE MECHANICS OF PORK**

*Citizens Against Government Waste has launched their own primer: ["All About Pork: The Abuse of Earmarks and the Needed Reforms"](#)*

#### **How Congress Spends Your Money**

Congress spends money by passing "[appropriations](#)" bills each year. There are 12 such bills in the Senate, each covering several federal agencies, that are part of the regular process and subject to budgetary caps established by the annual congressional budget process. When Congress passes a budget resolution, it imposes a spending limit for what's called the "discretionary" part of the federal budget. That includes the part that is not spent on entitlement programs that Congress is not legally allowed to limit - such as Social Security and Medicare. Congressional leaders then assign certain spending caps to each of the 12 appropriations bills. It takes a supermajority of the Senate to override those caps (but don't worry, those 60 votes are obtained all the time when Congress wants to bust its own budget!).

Outside of this regular appropriations process is what's called "[emergency supplemental](#)" [appropriations bills](#). Congress can pass an unlimited number of these each year for the alleged purpose of quickly addressing unforeseen emergencies such as funding massive disaster relief, or responding to a terror attack or act of war. In general, Congress tends to pass one or two of these each year. In recent years, they have been labeled as being for Katrina relief or for war funding. By continuing to pass supplemental "emergency" bills, even when the hurricane struck last year and the war is several years old, the Congress gets away with placing all these expensive but necessary programs outside the usual budget disciplinary measures. You see, supplemental appropriations bills operate outside the budget - they have no caps, and therefore no spending discipline is required. Heritage Foundation [recently published a report](#) on this problem.

That's why supplemental bills get turned into vehicles for every irresponsible spending whim of any member of Congress. They move quickly through the Congress, and they are seen as "must-pass" because no one wants to be the guy who voted against the war or against Katrina relief. In some instances, nobody sees the bills until right before they are supposed to vote.

#### **Earmarks Hidden in "Reports"**

What's worse, appropriations bills move with a so-called "report" attached. In these reports, additional elaboration beyond the bill language is provided by the bill authors, and this language is seen as almost as binding as the bill language itself. Agencies ignore this "report language" at their peril. Appropriators (the members of Congress who sit on the all-powerful [Appropriations committee](#)) threaten federal agencies with funding-related retribution if their report language directives are ignored. It is in these reports that most earmarks are hidden. The provisions get slipped into reports by the bill authors late at night, behind closed doors meaning no one gets a chance to vote on them individually. To make matters worse, these spending bills are often rammed through Congress before anybody has time to actually read them. Earmarks, however, aren't always in appropriations bills. Sometimes, they are stuffed into "authorization bills" like the notorious highway bill - a bill passed by the Congress every few years to reauthorize transportation programs. Regardless of what bill they move in, earmarks are usually only discovered after they have

become law.

### **So What Are Earmarks Anyway?**

Earmarks are short provisions that direct funds to a specific project in a specific location. Their champions come to Washington, D.C., to lobby members of Congress to insert the earmark into an appropriations bill, which essentially provides the organization in question a check for a certain amount of money to do a specific type of project. For example, more than \$250 million was earmarked to a so-called "Bridge to Nowhere" in Alaska to fund a long bridge to an island with 50 residents, where a 7-minute ferry already existed. Another example was a sculpture garden for several hundred thousand dollars in Seattle, Washington. Often, very little oversight occurs about whether the project was completed properly, on budget and on time. Earmarks are taken out of accounts that are supposed to fund broader programs that operate in a more competitive manner. For example, a grant program run by the Department of Housing and Urban Development that provides grants to communities for economic development projects is one of the worst-"raided" accounts for earmarks. This process leaves almost no money left in that account to fund the competitive grant program.

Perhaps the defining characteristic of earmarks, or "pork projects," is the fact individual members of Congress exercise sole funding and oversight authority over earmarked funds. Elected officials essentially agree to look the other way and not interfere with one another's supposed authority to earmark projects in their states. In most cases, no competition occurs, no outcomes are demanded and no accountability is provided for the taxpayers to ensure that they got something of value for their money.

### **Motivations for Earmarking**

Earmarks have grown over time. In the 1980s, President Reagan vetoed a spending bill because it had about 160 pork projects. Last year, more than 15,000 pork projects were passed by Congress. Earmarking is neither a time-honored tradition nor an honorable process. Earmarks serve a parochial interest at the local level - the very opposite of what federal programs are supposed to do. But then again, most of what the federal government does these days is outside its constitutional mandate. (Dr. Coburn held a [hearing on this problem](#).) More insidiously, though, members of Congress brag about the "pork" they bring home to their districts or states, some even putting out press releases when their projects get passed into law. In this way, the special interests in their districts who lobbied them for the project then praise the member and often campaign on his/her behalf. In other words, earmarking is inherently a political activity designed to keep incumbents in power and in the pocket of special interest groups in their home districts. There are only a handful of the 535 members of Congress who do not engage in earmarking. In the Senate, only three Senators do not earmark. Dr. Coburn is one of them.

### **Leading the Charge Against Pork**

Although some members defend the earmarking process as a legitimate use of power to serve their constituents, Dr. Coburn has led the fight against earmarking. He has vowed, along with Sen. John McCain (R-AZ), to challenge every single earmark this year, even if it means brining the entire appropriations process to a virtual standstill. Dr. Coburn believes earmarking is the "gateway drug" to spending addiction. Often, fiscally conservative members get bullied into voting for monstrously bad spending bills because they are threatened that if they vote against the bill, they will lose any earmarks they got inserted into the bill. In order to protect their earmarks, they violate their broader principles on spending.

For more information about various amendments Dr. Coburn has offered in order to battle the bacon, see the section below on Legislative and Floor Action. In addition to his floor action, Dr. Coburn has held a variety of hearings in the Federal Financial Management Subcommittee, including a recent [hearing on earmarking](#). He also convened a [hearing specifically on "cultural earmarks"](#) - museums, zoos, etc. These hearings links provide a wealth of testimony, charts and other resources. Dr. Coburn has also introduced several bills to bring sunshine to the earmarking process, both in the [Legislative branch](#), and another bill mandating sunshine once the money is at the [Executive Branch](#).

### **The Power of the People**

Only an informed voting public can begin to demand reform to the earmarking process. Many members of Congress engage in earmarking because they mistakenly believe they need to earmark in order to protect their seats. Only you can let them know they will instead *lose their seat* if they continue to put their own re-election ahead of the best long-term interests of the next generation. Dr. Coburn hopes this toolkit of media reports, charts, statistics and other information will empower you to let your elected officials know that earmarking is damaging America now and endangering the long-term fiscal legacy for future generations of Americans.