

Statement of Senator Daniel K. Inouye (D-Hawaii)
Against the Coburn Earmark Amendment to Food Safety Bill
November 29, 2010 (as prepared for delivery)

Mr. President, I rise today to speak against the Coburn amendment imposing a moratorium on Congressional initiatives, or earmarks, for the next three years.

Our Founding Fathers bestowed upon the Congress the authority to ensure that the people's representatives would make the final decisions about spending, and not the executive branch. They had lived under a monarchy, in which the power of the purse resided with the executive, and they had no desire to repeat the experience. In short, they did not want another king, they wanted a President. But a President whose power would be held firmly in check by a co-equal Congress.

None of us should be surprised that President Obama has expressed his opposition to earmarks. A ban on earmarks would serve to strengthen the executive branch of government by empowering the President to make decisions that the Constitution wisely places in the hands of Congress. This is the exact same reason presidents Clinton and Bush sought the line-item veto during their presidencies.

As I have said many times before, the people of Hawaii did not elect me to serve as a rubber stamp for any administration. Handing over the power of the purse to the Executive Branch would turn the Constitution on its head.

So I must admit I find it puzzling that some Republicans would want to grant all authority over spending to any President, but especially to a Democratic president. And, make no mistake that is exactly what this amendment would do.

We have heard numerous misleading arguments from opponents of earmarks, but several in particular seem to be repeated again and again. I cannot allow that misinformation or misrepresentation to go unanswered.

First and foremost, opponents falsely claim that earmarks contribute to the deficit. Perhaps the strongest proponent of this argument is the junior Senator from South Carolina, who stated the following in a fundraising letter he sent out in October: "I'm not willing to bankrupt my country for earmarks."

This is but one example of the many times over the past year in which so-called "deficit -hawks" have falsely asserted that earmarks are the root cause of our nation's fiscal troubles. This is especially galling when you consider that many of these same individuals supported the policies that led directly to the current budget crisis.

In the interest of setting the record straight, and as Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, I feel compelled to point out to my colleagues that eliminating earmarks would do virtually nothing to balance the federal budget. This is a cynical attempt to distract the American people from the serious challenges before us, and nothing more.

The numbers clearly demonstrate just how misleading the arguments of earmark opponents really are. According to the most recent Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimate, federal spending for Fiscal Year 2010 totals about \$3.5 trillion, and revenues for the year total about \$2.2 trillion, resulting in a deficit of \$1.3 trillion. Congressional initiatives make up less than one-half of one percent of total federal spending. If we accept this proposal to eliminate all earmarks and take the second necessary step of actually applying the savings to deficit reduction, the total deficit for the year would still be \$1.3 trillion.

If opponents of earmarks were serious about eliminating the deficit and paying down the national debt, they would offer a specific plan for cutting \$1.3 trillion in spending or for increasing revenues. Instead, they choose to mislead the American people by implying that we can balance the budget by cutting a tiny fraction of federal spending.

Calling for the elimination of congressional earmarks is a legitimate philosophical position to take, although not one with which I agree. However, to suggest that earmarks are the cause of our deficit of \$1.3 trillion is irresponsible.

Adding to this misleading rhetoric are allegations that congressionally directed spending is an inherently corrupt practice that is hidden from the public eye. That allegation is simply false. We all recognize that the practices of the previous majorities led to significant abuses of the system. However, since we recaptured the Congress in 2006, Democrats have instituted a series of major reforms that now hold members accountable, and have made earmarking more transparent than ever.

I would ask my colleagues, can anyone name another part of the federal budget -- and let me remind my colleagues that we are talking about less than one half of one percent of that budget -- that is subject to more scrutiny than earmarks? The Appropriations Committee requires every Member to post his or her requests for 30 days prior to the Committee's consideration of the relevant Appropriations bill. The Committee requires every Member to submit a letter stating that he or she does not have a pecuniary interest in the projects for which funding is being requested.

The Committee's website provides a link to every single Member request. These are all reforms that were implemented when the Democrats took control of the Senate and the House. To pretend and suggest that earmarks are being doled out in a "business as usual" manner reflective of previous Congresses is flat out misleading.

Reforms have been made that allow great projects that provide benefits to the nation and to individual states and districts to be funded while ensuring that the abuses of the early and mid-2000's are a thing of the past. There can be no doubt that we have entered an age of real transparency when it comes to earmarks.

Moreover, Mr. President, each and every earmark that comes before the Senate today is listed in the Committee report so that all Members are able to identify them and know exactly what they are voting on. And of course, the Internet makes all earmark requests available to the press and the public. The Internet also makes all campaign contributions over \$200 equally accessible. Where is the so-called corruption? Where are the 'secret' deals? Further, I would remind my colleagues that in 2010 funding for earmarks is less than half of the \$32 billion in earmarks provided in 2006.

Mr. President, I have spent considerable time refuting the misinformation being spread by those who are opposed to congressionally directed spending initiatives. I would like to highlight a few examples of why the practice of earmarking is indeed necessary. As Chairman of the Defense subcommittee, I have witnessed the benefits of earmarks first hand over many years. I have previously discussed the benefits to our troops and our nation of the Predator drone. And I have pointed to the new bandages that quickly stop bleeding in serious wounds and that have saved countless lives of our soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Let me now turn to other areas of the federal budget. I would start by reminding my colleagues that one of the most successful programs for low-income women and infants started out as an earmark. In the 1969 Agriculture Appropriations bill, Congress earmarked funds for a new program named WIC, to provide critical nutrition to low-income women, infants and children. Over the past 41 years, this program has provided nutritional assistance to over 150 million women, infants and children, making a critical contribution to the health of the nation. A vital program that has provided much needed assistance to millions, and it came into existence as an earmark.

In 1969 and 1970, Congress earmarked \$25 million for a children's hospital in Washington, DC, despite the objections of and veto by the President. That funding resulted in what we know today as the Children's National Medical Center. Children's Hospital has become a national and international leader in neo-natal and pediatric care, providing health care to over five million children since its doors opened. Again, I note that this was an idea – an earmark – directed by Congress and vetoed by the President.

In 1987, Congress earmarked funds, at the request of Senator Domenici, for the mapping of the human gene. This project became known as the Human Genome Project. This research has led to completely new strategies for disease prevention and treatment, including discoveries of dramatic new methods of identifying and treating breast, ovarian, and colon cancers. No one disputes that these advances will save many, many lives. Again, a project that was not supported by unelected agency bureaucrats in the executive branch, and thus would never have made it into the budget without Congressional intervention.

In the early 1990's I pursued along with my dear friend, the Senator from Alaska, the late Ted Stevens, an earmark through NOAA to fund a Tsunami Warning System. This earmark came under attack in the late 1990's and early 2000's by a few members as wasteful spending. Of course, in this particular case, as in many others, time and events would prove this to be a wise investment of tax dollars.

We all remember that on December 26, 2004, the Indian Ocean Tsunami occurred, killing over 200,000 people in 14 countries. Two years later, the Republican Congress passed and the Bush Administration signed into law The Tsunami Warning and Education Act. This legislation was based on the foundation established by the 14 years of earmarking for the Tsunami Hazard Mitigation Program.

A congressional initiative that began in 1998 at the behest of Senator Gregg would lead to the creation of the National Domestic Preparedness Consortium (NDPC), which is now the principal vehicle through which FEMA identifies, develops, tests and delivers training to state and local emergency responders. The program began as a series of earmarks for several nationally recognized organizations which focused on counter-terrorism preparedness and response needs of the nation's federal, state and local emergency first responders and emergency management agencies. As a result of the training and expertise provided by NDPC members, thousands of New York City first responders had been through counterterrorism preparedness and response training at the Centers prior to the 9-11 terrorist attacks.

There are thousands of other earmarks just like these that over the years have made a difference in the lives of Americans -- projects that the bureaucrats in downtown Washington, DC, never hear about because they do not communicate with constituents on a regular basis. Programs, like the Predator and the Human Genome Project, that are so innovative that an unelected, unaccountable government official is reluctant to include in the budget out of fear that he or she will be accused of wasting taxpayer funds on an unproven technology.

Mr. President, other members will be speaking against this amendment and will have other examples of why simply stopping all earmarking is wrong and detrimental for our government and our citizens.

The founding fathers bestowed upon the Congress the responsibility to determine how our taxes should be spent, rather than leaving those decisions to unelected bureaucrats in the Administration, and obviously with good reason. Certainly we can all agree that members of Congress who return home nearly every weekend to meet with their constituents have a much better understanding of what is needed in our cities and towns, and across rural America, than do the bureaucrats sitting in Washington D.C.

So for all these reasons, I will continue to defend the right of the Congress to direct spending to worthy projects as long as I am privileged to serve in the U.S. Senate and call attention to those who distort the facts on the subject.

I urge my colleagues to vote against the Coburn amendment. We have already taken significant and forceful steps to ensure the abuses of the past are not repeated. This amendment ignores those steps while at the same time deprives the Congress of essential Constitutional prerogatives. It does nothing to decrease the debt, and is designed to give political cover to those who lack a serious commitment to deficit reduction.