

There are still a number of members of Congress who believe that the "earmarking" process, under which we direct billions of dollars of your money to specific pet projects of ours, is fine and needs no reform. Those members of Congress are wrong. They are defending the indefensible. Sometimes they...

There are still a number of members of Congress who believe that the "earmarking" process, under which we direct billions of dollars of your money to specific pet projects of ours, is fine and needs no reform.

Those members of Congress are wrong. They are defending the indefensible. Sometimes they point out that earmarks represent only about 1.2 percent of the federal budget. That is true. Of course, that amount is still over \$11 billion. Only inside the Washington Beltway can \$11 billion be called a small amount of money. It is not a small amount, and saving it would be well worth doing.

Earmark defenders will go on to say that eliminating earmarks wouldn't really save any money because federal bureaucrats would still spend the money. House rules have been written specifically to make this the case. But rules can be changed by a majority vote of the House. Texas Reps. John Culbertson and Mike Conaway have tried to change the rules so that the elimination of any earmark results in a decline in total spending by the amount of that earmark so that the taxpayers save money, and the deficit is reduced. This totally sensible proposal has been soundly rejected by a bipartisan group of spenders.

But the earmark debate is really less about money than it is about power. Those in both parties who dispense earmarks use their largess with your tax dollars to increase their influence in Washington. First of all, they spend more themselves. According to Taxpayers for Common Sense, seven lawmakers in House leadership garnered 9 percent of all earmarks. Of the \$8.5 billion in disclosed earmarks, Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco; Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md.; Minority Whip Roy Blunt, R-Mo.; Appropriations Chairman David Obey, D-Wisc.; Ranking Member Jerry Lewis, R-Redlands; Defense Appropriations Subcommittee Chairman John Murtha, D-Pa.; and Ranking Member Bill Young, R-Fla.; directed a combined \$776.4 million.

Secondly, earmarks are used as leverage for more spending. Sen. Tom Coburn, R-Okla.,

recently stated that earmarks are "the gateway drug to overspending." That's because many members of Congress are reluctant to vote against a bill that includes an earmark for them. I have watched this process up close, and it is not pretty. Earmarks result in much more spending than their direct cost.

One former member of Congress is now in federal prison because of personal gain from earmarks, and at least seven senators or congressmen are currently under federal investigation at least in part because of earmarks. But there are abuses beyond personal gain. Hundreds of earmarks are given to private companies with no competitive bidding and without the taxpayer getting any product in return. Many earmarks are simply charitable contributions using your money but with the member of Congress taking the "credit" for the donation. Still others have no federal purpose whatsoever.

Here are some examples from this year's crop of inappropriate earmarks:

- "The Monument to Me" (Charles Rangel, D-N.Y.): \$2 million to establish the Rangel Center for Public Service at City College of New York. It will include a "well-furnished office for the congressman."
- "Not in My Back Yard" (Jerry Lewis R-CA): \$850,000 to redevelop an already redeveloped area in Washington, D.C. – 2,500 miles from Lewis' Inland Empire district.
- Abraham Lincoln National Airport Commission (Jesse Jackson Jr., D-Ill.): \$231,000 to develop opportunities for minorities and small businesses at an airport that doesn't exist. Additionally, the executive director of the Airport Commission is the deputy district director for Rep. Jackson.
- "I don't even know if this project exists" (Murtha, D-Pa.): \$1 million for a Center for Instrumental Critical Infrastructure in Pennsylvania. On the House floor, Rep. Jeff Flake, R-Ariz.,

asked whether the center currently exists, and the Energy and Water Appropriations Subcommittee could not confirm that it does.

They cost billions, cause even more overspending, are not subject to enough disclosure and are regularly wasteful or abusive. But those who wield them do not want to give up that power. In the end, however, voters have the ultimate power. It's time to reform or eliminate earmarks, but that will only happen when the public makes enough noise that they've had enough.