

Farm Bill Yet Another Example of Democrats' Broken Promises on Earmark Reform

by John Boehner Monday, May 12, 2008

There's something fishy in the Farm Bill, and taxpayers should beware. It's a \$170 million earmark for the salmon industry, quietly tucked into the mammoth bill at the last minute by Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) and Rep. Mike Thompson (D-CA). I don't know much about the salmon industry. Perhaps Pelosi and Thompson can explain why it was necessary to earmark \$170 million of the taxpayers' money with no public scrutiny or debate. The earmark wasn't in the House-passed Farm Bill or the Senate version; it was simply "air-dropped" into the final bill in secret.

The Farm Bill has often been abused by politicians as a slush fund for bizarre earmarks and wasteful spending projects, and the latest version up for a vote on the House floor this week is no different. During Farm Bill negotiations, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) slipped in a targeted earmark to help the Plum Creek Timber Company in Montana sell a parcel of land to the scandal-tarnished "environmental group," the Nature Conservancy. The earmark allows the Nature Conservancy to claim a \$250 million "tax refund" – even though, as a non-profit they don't actually pay taxes. But instead of being open and honest about their intentions to spend \$250 million in taxpayer money, Democrats attempted to keep it secret by crafting the provision to ensure the funds go only to a federal forest project of a certain size that also has fish. That's right. Fish. In a forest. Forest fish. In the whole country, only one tract fits the bill – and it happens to be located in Senator Baucus' home state of Montana.

These examples serve as a perfect illustration of why taxpayers are fed up with a broken Washington. Despite the Speaker's promises to "drain the swamp" at the beginning of the 110th Congress, it has become increasingly clear why Democrats are fighting as hard as they can to keep the earmark factory open on Capitol Hill. Not only have Democratic leaders have "showered" their newly-elected Members in pork in the attempt to help them win re-election, but their senior members – including the "King of Pork," Rep. John Murtha (D-PA) – have made it clear that wasteful earmarks are here to stay.

I've been an earmark reform advocate since my earliest days in Congress. When I first ran for the House, I told voters in my district that if they were looking for somebody to go to Washington and raid the federal treasury on their behalf, they should vote for someone else. For years, this personal stance made me something of an oddity in Congress. But as spending exploded in past Congresses, more and more people began to recognize that the out-of-control earmark process has become the defining symbol of how a broken Washington wastes taxpayers' money.

We did not make nearly enough progress on earmark reform during our time in the Majority, and though we began to implement meaningful reforms after I became Majority Leader in 2006, the fact is, our efforts were too little, too late. But the need to fundamentally reform the earmark process has taken on new urgency since Democrats, who now control Congress, seem intent on breaking nearly every promise they made to the American people.

Earlier this year, my House Republican colleagues met to discuss how we should stop wasteful earmarks and reform how Congress spends taxpayer dollars. We decided that the best way forward was to ask Speaker Pelosi to join us in supporting a total freeze in earmarks while we a real discussion of how to reform the system. We also adopted a series of earmark reform standards immediately, one of which prohibits members from "air-dropping" earmarks into conference measures at the last minute. Ironically, Speaker Pelosi's \$170 million salmon earmark in the Farm Bill would have been prohibited under our Republican reforms.

We have continued to make our case to the American people. Since the Speaker refused to work with us, we began forcing House votes on a bill written by three Republicans – Reps. Frank Wolf, Jack Kingston, and Zach Wamp – that would institute a total earmark freeze and keep the earmark factory shut down until reforms are in place to prevent wasteful pork-barreling. These votes put the Democrats on the record opposing earmark reform – including their newest Members who campaigned on the issue.

We haven't won yet, but we are making progress on reform. Since we began this effort, a growing number of my GOP colleagues have sworn off earmarks. Some Democrats have broken ranks with Speaker Pelosi on the issue as well. One of the Democrats' most partisan chairmen, Henry Waxman of the Government Reform and Oversight Committee, admitted he agreed with Republican concerns about earmarks and announced a personal earmark moratorium. Two more senior Democrats, Reps. Ron Kind and Jim Cooper, have done the same.

Washington is broken, and it will never be fixed until the earmarks stop and real reform begins. Sadly, the Farm Bill the House considers this week is yet another example of Congress putting secret earmarks and wasteful spending ahead of the interests of the American people. Speaker Pelosi has the power to shut down the earmark process at any time, yet she inserted a \$170 million earmark into the Farm Bill at the last minute with no discussion or debate. Can anyone really claim this is the "most open, most honest, and most ethical Congress in history"?