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Minnick makes point about knives

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By William L. Spence of the Tribune

Idaho congressman demonstrates spring-assisted knife to members of House panel in bid to derail Customs rule

Rumors that Idaho Congressman Walt Minnick pulled a switchblade on the House Rules Committee may be slightly exaggerated.

But he did pull a knife.

Minnick, together with Rep. Robert Latta, R-Ohio, met with the rules committee late Tuesday, seeking approval to attach an amendment to an appropriations bill.

The amendment would have blocked a U.S. Customs effort to change a 50-year-old definition and reclassify certain spring-assisted knives as illegal switchblades. Spring-assisted knives can be opened one-handed, but they lack the button traditional switchblades have. The American Knife and Tool Institute, which represents manufacturers and retailers, estimates they account for 80 percent of all pocketknives sold in this country.

Although the Customs ruling - which has yet to be finalized - is directed specifically at imported knives, American manufacturers are concerned it could eventually affect interstate commerce and thereby curtail their production.

While explaining all this to the committee, Minnick pulled out his handy Buck pocketknife and flicked it open.

"Some of the committee members haven't been in the outdoors as much as people in Idaho, so I thought that was the best way to show them (what type of implements might be affected by the Customs ruling)," Minnick said. "It was educational and useful. I think we had everyone on the committee convinced that what Customs is doing makes no sense, (although) one senior member said that was the first time anyone had pulled a knife on the committee."

The committee chairman ultimately declined to allow any amendments to the bill. However, the switchblade ruling has attracted significant opposition in Congress. Latta recently sent a letter to Department of Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano asking that the ruling be tabled; the letter was signed by more than 80 House Republicans and Democrats. Idaho's entire congressional delegation sent a similar letter to Napolitano last week.

"All the theater aside, this issue is important to manufacturers like Buck Knives," Minnick said. "We'll find another vehicle to get this stopped."