

Bacon comes home in thinner slices

- **January 26th, 2010**
- (4) comments

Marty Trilhaase

A year ago, freshman Congressman Walt Minnick, D-Idaho, announced he would not seek earmarks for his district. The stance, Minnick said reflected his commitment to fiscal restraint.

Monday, Minnick reiterated he wants no part of the practice.

About the same time, Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, made good on his plan not to seek the Senate Appropriations Committee slot vacated by the retiring Larry Craig. Crapo had built up seniority on the Finance Committee and didn't want to relinquish it. He continues to seek earmarks, but his committee assignments diminish his access to them.

How's that working out?

Not so well.

Through their choices, Minnick and Crapo haven't helped matters.

Second district Congressman Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, holds a seat on the House Appropriations Committee. But for years, Idaho also relied on having a senator, whether it was Craig or his predecessor, Jim McClure, on the Senate panel.

Odds are Idaho was going to feel some pain at losing Craig - who was the ranking member of the Interior subcommittee of appropriations and sat on another subcommittee dealing with labor and Health and Human Services. Idaho is a rural, western state with a small congressional delegation. It's also extremely dependent on federal dollars.

In the fiscal year 2008 budget - which reflected the full scope of Craig's influence before his arrest in a Minneapolis airport rest room sex sting - Idaho received \$35 million in earmarks through the Labor/HHS/Education, Interior and Transportation budgets.

Included within that was \$6.9 million in earmarks for the First Congressional District. Some of the projects included money for transit systems, surface transportation at Lewiston and Gritman Memorial Hospital at Moscow.

Last year, Idaho's share of earmarks from those three budgets dropped to \$18.2 million. Money from earmarks flowing into the First Congressional District shrunk to \$4.8 million. Destinations for some of those dollars included improvements on the highway linking Banks to Lowman, U.S. Highway 95 near Thorn Creek, transit systems, help for the Coeur d'Alene Indian Tribe, Gritman Memorial Hospital and Lewis-Clark State College.

These are only three accounts. But because they spread resources across the state in core areas, they're worth considering.

By contrast, energy and water appropriations are skewed toward the Idaho National Laboratory near Idaho Falls. The Department of Defense directs much of its money toward installations such as Mountain Home Air Force Base and Gowen Field in Boise.

Closer to home, Craig's last good year in the Senate saw the delegation deliver \$15.6 million in earmarks to the University of Idaho. Among those were \$1.1 million to study rainbow trout, \$1 million for computer-related research and \$1.6 million extra-low-frequency signals in maritime environments.

Those numbers dropped to \$11.5 million last year. The UI picked up \$4.8 million for wood utilization work and \$2 million for electromagnetic signature assessment research.

According to the House Appropriations Committee, congressional earmarks dropped about 7 percent below the 2008 levels. Idaho's share of earmarks declined much faster. Idaho's sacrifice is not the nation's gain, however.

Congress sets the spending levels, and individual members of Congress earmark about 2 percent of those funds. So if Idaho's congressional delegation is less aggressive about picking up earmarks, the dollars will be spent in other states.

Minnick is keeping his pledge.

Crapo is standing by his choice.

But their decisions are having consequences at home. - M.T.