

Crapo, Risch should follow Simpson, not Labrador

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Hardly anyone is paying much attention to Congressman Raul Labrador's vote against a two-year extension of Secure Rural School funding - and the so-called "doc fix" bill to which it was attached.

With the possible exception of Sens. Mike Crapo and Jim Risch, both R-Idaho.

That would be a problem.

Not just for rural communities such as Grangeville, Riggins and Orofino, but for senior Idahoans everywhere.

Labrador was on the losing side of a 392-37 vote against SRS and "doc fix." Rep. Mike Simpson, R-Idaho, was on the winning side.

With the issue headed to the Senate within the next week or so, the question becomes: Whose example will Crapo and Risch follow?

Start with SRS.

If they stick with Simpson, the two senators will hand Idaho's struggling timber communities a two-year lifeline worth about \$28 million a year. Of that, \$7.6 million goes to Idaho County alone. Mountain View School District depends on SRS for about 10 percent of its budget.

Another \$1.3 million is allocated to Clearwater County.

But if they follow Labrador, the two senators will give this kind of lip service to the program:

"I have long advocated a lasting replacement for SRS," Labrador wrote in an April 2 "Dear Friends" letter. "In fact, I would have supported extending SRS funding in a stand-alone bill, or as part of a relevant natural resources legislation."

It will never happen. Even Crapo said as much April 2 in Nezperce. SRS and programs like it benefit a small number of rural Americans. It's just not a priority with other members of Congress, for whom SRS is a dilemma between cutting one of their own programs or signing on to more debt.

That's why SRS - and its cousin, federal Payment in Lieu of Taxes - almost never stand alone. They get attached to larger, must-pass pieces of legislation. In 2008, SRS was part of the emergency Troubled Asset Relief Program. Four years later, it was part of the federal transportation package.

Labrador says his real gripe is "doc fix" - shorthand for shoring up the Medicare reimbursements paid to health care providers. He says the deal, worked out between Speaker John Boehner and Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, adds \$141 billion to the federal deficit during the next decade.

"It's easy to be bipartisan when adding to the debt," Labrador says. "The parties need to come together to improve our unsustainable fiscal situation, not to worsen it.

"I won't forget my promise to restore fiscal sanity," Labrador wrote. "Continuing to kick the can down the road is irresponsible, wrong-headed and immoral. I simply won't do it."

But the budget costs Labrador cites are a piece of political fiction.

Back in 1997, Congress balanced the budget on a pledge to scale back Medicare's reimbursements to health care providers. It began with a 4.8 percent slice set for 2002, progressing to 10.1 percent in 2010 and reaching nearly 27 percent today.

Actually following through would be calamitous. Either doctors and hospitals would go broke or they'd stop treating Medicare patients.

"Instead of fixing the problem directly by repealing the (Sustainable Growth Rate formula), Congress has applied 17 temporary patches since 2003 and put off the real cure, creating uncertainty for seniors in Medicare and military personnel in Tricare," Idaho Medical Association President Keith Davis wrote in the Idaho Statesman last week.

By passing a permanent "doc fix," the House actually saved about \$70 billion - in real money - during the next decade by requiring wealthier retirees to pay more of their own medical bills. If the cuts weren't real, AARP would not be griping about it.

Simpson infuriated Labrador by saying someone would "have to look long and hard to find a reason to vote no." But Simpson was right. If you rely on a big program such as Medicare or a comparatively minor one such as Secure Rural Schools, you better hope Crapo and Risch follow his

advice. - M.T.