

## Earmarks come from someplace, like here

Jim Fisher

Wednesday, March 11, 2009

Idahoans unhappy with all the earmarks in the big spending bill now before the U.S. Senate have a lot of people to blame, including the members of their own congressional delegation.

Make that their own congressional delegation of last year. As the Obama administration correctly points out, to the derision of some, the bill was assembled before the new Congress, and the new president, assumed office. That means freshman Democrat Walt Minnick is responsible for none of the earmarks, but, as his predecessor's former press secretary points out, the four Republicans then in office - also not including freshman Sen. Jim Risch - are.

They include Republican Rep. Bill Sali, whom Minnick defeated, and three other Republicans, Rep. Mike Simpson, Sen. Mike Crapo and former Sen. Larry Craig. And as Wayne Hoffman, who spoke for Sali, says, the four are responsible for 65 earmarks specific to Idaho, totaling more than \$69 million. (Another 10 worth \$5.6 million are directed to Idaho and one or more neighboring states.)

Hoffman speaks for himself these days, as executive director of the Idaho Freedom Foundation, a new conservative think tank. And he doesn't think much of all the earmarks from Idaho's and other states' delegations.

"Not all of the earmarks are objectionable," Hoffman writes in Sunday's Idaho Statesman of Boise. "The \$2.2 million slated for interstate highway improvements, sponsored by all four congressional members, is probably justified because it is part of the federal highway system. (Some might even argue that one.) But what's the reason for making taxpayers in Custer County, Okla., contribute toward the \$285,000 in federal money that will be used to buy a middle school building in Custer County, Idaho?"

As Hoffman knows, the members of Congress who do secure earmarks, which is most of them, and of both parties, have an answer: It is preferable to have elected representatives of states and congressional districts choose where money is spent than to have unelected federal bureaucrats choose.

But as Hoffman also knows, the "we better get ours while others are getting theirs" mentality does the opposite of discouraging big spending.

Where Hoffman and this page probably part company is on the need for big spending during the current economic recession. This page sides with investor Warren Buffett, who compares the near-meltdown of the economy to the Pearl Harbor invasion and says, "We're in a big war, and we're going to use money to fight it."

But about one thing there is no argument: Earmarks are one of Congress' rare success stories in bipartisanship. And anyone who points a finger at one party as more guilty than the other is really giving his audience the finger. - J.F.