

Otter's 'no' to Obamacare morphs into 'maybe'

Marty Trillhaase The Lewiston Tribune | [1 comment](#)

Earlier this year, Idaho Gov. C. L. (Butch) Otter famously stuck his thumb in the eye of national health care reform - what he calls "Obamacare."

Although he vetoed the Legislature's bill nullifying the federal act, Otter did the next best thing. He issued an executive order prohibiting any "executive branch department, agency, institution or employee of the state" from:

- Implementing health care reform.
- Entering into any "agreement or obligation" to implement health care reform.
- Providing "assistance or resources of any kind" to implement health care reform.
- Accepting or spending federal funds toward implementing federal health care reform.

Case closed.

End of story.

Ain't gonna do it.

Well, not really.

Otter is having it both ways.

When the Tea Party is looking, he's anti- Obamacare.

When the Tea Party's back is turned, the governor grants waivers from his own ban.

Otter's waivers have enabled \$18.9 million in health care reform grants to flow into state coffers.

Among them are \$12.5 million for a College of Southern Idaho initiative to train Idahoans who have lost jobs due to foreign competition and almost \$2 million to Idaho State University to support physician residency and physicians' assistants programs.

The governor permitted a series of Health and Welfare waivers, including one to help smokers quit the habit.

And where did the governor hold the line?

Allowing Idaho's insurance regulators to scrutinize how much your health insurance premium rises.

Someone else will dissect those premiums. Good thing, too.

If a natural gas supplier, a telephone company or an electric utility wants a rate increase in Idaho, it must justify it to the Public Utilities Commission. Hearings are held. The public gets its say. Usually, the utilities get only a portion of what they wanted.

But in many states, Idaho included, health insurance premium changes went unchallenged. Idaho asked only to be notified of pending increases. Across the country, health insurance costs jumped 131 percent in the last dozen years.

Health care reform remedies that. Under the law, at least 80 percent of your health insurance premium must go toward medical care, not administration or profit. Any time an insurance company intends to boost rates more than 10 percent, it must satisfy an outside actuary.

Individual state insurance regulators are supposed to be that watchdog. Health care reform distributed \$250 million to the states, including \$1 million to the Idaho Department of Insurance, to launch the program.

Otter said no.

That doesn't mean someone won't be looking over the shoulder of your health insurance company.

It just won't be Otter's Department of Insurance.

Beginning Sept. 1, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services will assign a unit to review rate increases in Idaho.

So Idaho's citizens will share in the benefits of national health care reform.

For Idaho-based health insurance companies such as Blue Cross of Idaho or Regence BlueShield of Idaho, however, Otter's gesture of defiance creates a greater hardship.

Businesses prefer dealing with state agencies. For instance, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, rather than the Environmental Protection Agency, enforces federal environmental mandates. That doesn't change the law, but a state agency may be more business-friendly. If nothing else, it has an Idaho location and phone number.

Yet Otter would have health insurance companies working with a federal bureaucrat, who may be based anywhere from Seattle to Miami. He won't know the Idaho marketplace. His bosses aren't politically accountable to the Idaho voter or business community.

Granting \$19 million worth of waivers on one hand while denying one provision that would help Idaho businesses and consumers alike is arbitrary. The governor is playing politics, and in this case he has painted himself into a corner. - M.T.