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Pork Barrel “Science”

The polite term on Capitol Hill is “earmarking.” But whether one calls it earmarking or pork barrel, it is a reprehensible activity practiced by a few powerful members of Congress. Moreover, it has reached a point where the negative impact on scientific projects is very real, as is apparent from the following excerpt of recent remarks by George Brown, chairman of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee.

“Mr. Speaker...I want...to comment on the...practice of adding unauthorized, unrequested earmarks for personal interest items.

“This, of course, is in many ways a time-honored tradition of this body and could be overlooked if it were not for the severe budgetary environment that we have had to operate within this year and for the foreseeable future. This year, the budget reductions that Congress has had to make have made it entirely inappropriate to indulge in the earmarking that we are being asked to approve.

“...I want to take a few moments to cite a few examples and explain why I believe this practice has simply gone too far.

“In the NASA area, I am certain that my colleagues recall the debate earlier this year over the space station. That debate was, in many ways, a historic one. We were asked to make a major decision on whether we could afford to continue the space station when so many other programs were in dire need of funding. These included space science programs, housing programs, environmental programs, and veterans programs. We voted to continue the station, and there can be no doubt that many of these other meritorious programs have not received the funding they needed.

“Yet the conference report [that is, final bill] contains over \$100 million in projects that were never requested by the administration, never authorized, and never discussed on the floor. We were never given the choice between the station and these projects. These appear in the NASA portion of the budget, but some can scarcely even be called space projects.

“The conferees generously set aside over \$40 million for a vast variety of brick and mortar projects in West Virginia. These include \$22.5 million in funding for a National Technology Transfer Center in Morgantown, WV. The proponent envisions that persons inquiring about technological advances that are taking place through government projects must write to West Virginia for the answer. It includes \$7.5 million in continued funding for the Wheeling, West Virginia, Jesuit College. I do not believe anyone in Congress or in NASA knows what this will be used for.

“It includes continued funding for a consortium of universities and consultants in the Saginaw, MI, area which somehow has emerged as the center for environmental research over the past 3 years.... NASA itself has little idea where this funding is going.

“It includes \$20 million for the Christopher Columbus Center for Marine Research in Baltimore. I stress Marine research, not Space research....

“The conference report terminates a vast variety of NASA scientific projects such as the space infrared telescope,...the orbiting solar observatory...and the flight telerobotic servicer. These are all projects that scientists have spent decades planning and developing. These are all projects that could have been funded with a little more restraint on the part of the conferees....

“I note that while the recommended funding level [for the National Science Foundation] represents an increase, the funding for research at NSF in this agreement is below that passed by either the House or the Senate. This is the only NSF function which is below the funding level approved by one of the Houses and is probably the most critical function at NSF....

“I must note with some concern that the conference agreement contains language earmarking \$2 million for planning a demonstration for shared supercomputer use. While I agree with the need for this type of a program, I worry that we are moving dangerously close to earmarking within the NSF funding, a threshold which we have not crossed to date....”

With regard to the pork barrel sites mentioned by Representative Brown, it is no coincidence that chairs of three of the relevant appropriation committees come from West Virginia, Maryland, and Michigan.

While it is reassuring to have someone with George Brown’s good sense in a key position in the House, his ability to influence is limited to his powers of persuasion, because he chairs an authorizing, not an appropriating, committee. Brown’s willingness to take on this issue deserves the support of the entire scientific community.—RICHARD S. NICHOLSON

Science

Pork Barrel "Science"

RICHARD S. NICHOLSON

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