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By Jo Stevens

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When the Senate returns to work on March 28, it will resume debate on an amendment to the Small Business Jobs Bill (S. 493) that would eliminate all funding for seven independent federal agencies, including the [Consumer Product Safety Commission](#) (CPSC).

The amendment is sponsored by [Sen. Rand Paul](#) (R-KY), a leader of the Tea Party's efforts to cut federal spending and a vocal critic of the CPSC. Although it is not expected to pass, it illustrates how far some members of Congress are willing to go to axe federal government programs.

The CPSC was established by Congress forty years ago to protect consumers from products that can cause an unreasonable risk of injury in homes, school and places of recreation. It has authority to set safety standards,

require labeling, order recalls, ban hazardous products, collect injury and death data and educate the public about product safety.

According to a recent Consumers Union poll, the CPSC is one of the more popular federal agencies with the public. Ninety-eight percent of poll respondents agreed that the federal government should play a prominent role in improving product safety. Three years ago Congress passed legislation to significantly reform the CPSC following the recall of millions of children's toys and other products that were tainted with lead or other harmful substances. The legislation gave the CPSC more authority to pull unsafe products off the shelves faster and approved the creation of a new product safety database where consumers can register complaints.

But the CPSC and, in particular, the safety database, has come under a barrage of attacks in Congress this year. The House has voted to eliminate funding for the product safety database as part of its effort to cut federal spending for the rest of this year. Now Senator Paul has ramped up the debate in the Senate to cut funding for the entire agency.

A spokesperson for Sen. Paul has been quoted as saying that the CPSC is "unnecessary" and that other consumer groups, like [Consumer Reports](#), could replace the CPSC. Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst with the libertarian think tank CATO Institute, agrees. "As a consumer, I'm more curious to see what Consumer Reports has to say and less what the government has to say about product safety."

He said oversight by non-profits would be more "trustworthy" and would be subject to "less undue influence from industry." "Businesses are typically behind regulation because they can influence it in such a way to kill off competition, especially new entrants," he explained. He said regulatory agencies like the CPSC can also create a "false sense of safety" for consumers. "You shouldn't just trust what the government tells you."

As expected, reaction from consumer advocacy groups has been swift and strong. A letter to senators signed by the Consumer Federation of America, Consumers Union, Kids in Danger, National Research Center for Women and Families, Natural Resources Defense Council, Public Citizen, Union of Concerned Scientists and U.S. Public Interest Research Group stated, "Defunding the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission is an outrageous effort that would endanger every American. ...[I]t would devastate consumer product safety in the United States and risk American lives."

"It's definitely a provocative proposal," said Christine Hines of Public Citizen. "It's shocking and an attention-getting tactic. Maybe [Senator Paul] really believes there is no need for the CPSC, but it's a ridiculous idea. There is no way a non-profit can do what CPSC is doing."

Hines said that the reform legislation that passed three years ago made the agency much more effective by giving it more resources and increasing penalties for businesses that violate safety standards. Businesses rely on agencies to provide rules so that they can all play on the same playing field, consumer advocates argue.

Senator Paul may be swimming upstream in trying to eliminate the CPSC in a democratic-controlled Senate. As DeHaven of the CATO Institute candidly observed, "When it comes to lead paint in toys, what politician wants to stick out his neck to vote against regulating that?" Regardless, Senator Paul's provocative amendment has changed the nature of the debate. No longer is Congress just talking about reducing funding for the CPSC, it's talking about why it should exist in the first place.

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The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has revised its child restraint guidelines to be categorized by age rather than by type of child seat. The idea is to keep pace with the latest scientific and medical research and the development of new child restraint technologies. Under the new guidelines, NHTSA is advising parents and caregivers to keep children in each restraint type — including rear-facing, forward-facing and booster seats — for as long as possible before moving them up [...]

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