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Richmond Times-Dispatch

Published: November 20, 2011

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Christmas Tree Tax: Grinches

By Times-Dispatch Staff

Let's get one thing straight at the outset: Yes, the Obama administration did propose a tax on Christmas trees, and no amount of obfuscation by its knee-jerk defenders can change that fact. The Department of Agriculture planned to impose a 15-cent duty on every Christmas tree sold by tree-sellers who unload more than 500 trees a season. That is an excise tax — a tax on a specific product, levied per unit of sale, just like federal taxes on tobacco and gasoline.

The proposal provoked an uproar, and the White House will now "revisit this action." That's politician-speak for "run from the issue like a scalded dog."

Was the tax sought by Christmas-tree growers? Indeed it was. They wanted the federal government to run a Christmas-tree promotion campaign, much like those it runs for eggs and other agricultural products. But that's no excuse. As Ilya Schapiro of the Cato Institute notes, this little tale epitomizes everything wrong with government today.

Washington has no more business hawking Christmas trees than it has hawking eggs, milk or beef. Persuading consumers to purchase live rather than artificial holiday trees is not government's job. And even if promoting pine trees did fall within the scope of the federal government's constitutionally enumerated powers, taxes are supposed to be levied by Congress — not agencies of the executive branch. Finally, there's an interesting First Amendment question about whether a special tax on Christmas trees singles out Christianity for a burden not imposed on other faiths.

The Christmas-tree tax has been axed, for now. But the underlying problem remains. The public would be wise to keep an eye on the Grinches who sought the tax — and the other Grinches who were all too willing to grant their wish.

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