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June 3, 2010 in Idaho

Minnick spending-cut bill gains new stature

Betsy Z. Russell The Spokesman-Review

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Legislation proposed by freshman Idaho Congressman Walt Minnick to make it easier for the president to push Congress to slice specific items out of big spending bills has been latched onto by the Obama Administration, which last week introduced its own bill modeled after Minnick's.

Both bills - Minnick's was called the "Budget Enforcement Legislative Tool Act of 2010," or the BELT Act, while the Obama Administration's is the "Reduce Unnecessary Spending Act of 2010" - would let the president pick out a list of items from a bill and send it back to Congress for a fast-track, up-or-down vote.

Office of Management and Budget Director Peter Orszag said the bill "will empower the president and the Congress to eliminate unnecessary spending while discouraging waste in the first place."

Minnick said, "The lack of fiscal responsibility is one of the most dire problems facing our nation, and it requires Congress to change the way it does business - which is why I am pleased to see my proposal receive broad attention and support."

Minnick introduced his "BELT" bill on March 24; the administration's bill, with Minnick among its co-sponsors, was introduced May 28.

The bill is a step toward a return to the line-item veto, something most governors have but presidents have lacked through most of U.S. history. There was a two-year exception: Congress passed a line-item veto act with bipartisan backing in 1996, in an effort to target "pork," or spending items with just narrow benefit tucked into larger, broader bills. Then-President Bill Clinton used it on 11 spending bills before it was declared unconstitutional in 1998.

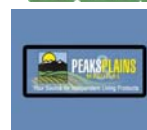
The Cato Institute estimated that Clinton's use of the line-item veto saved taxpayers nearly \$2 billion over five years.

Minnick's chief of staff, Kate Haas, said the BELT bill and the new administration version were cleared for constitutionality by the House legislative council, because the spending changes still would require an up-or-down majority vote in both houses. Overriding a line-item veto took two-thirds votes in each house.

Differences between the two bills include a 2012 sunset, or expiration, in Minnick's original version, and a 2014 sunset in Obama's; a 25 percent cap on how much could be cut out of an existing program in Minnick's bill, vs. no cap but a requirement that the president identify how much will be cut, how much will be left in the program, and the reasons for the cut in the Obama bill; and a 45-day timeline for cuts in the Obama bill, compared to just three days in Minnick's original version.

"That was just a work-flow issue that OMB recommended, a more realistic time frame for them to be able to turn that around," Haas said.

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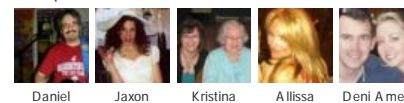
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Both versions would allow the president to alert Congress about everything from earmarks to waste to pork, and ask Congress to quickly remove the identified items from spending bills.

"Neither political party has done enough to reduce reckless spending, and the people of Idaho demand that government tighten its belt during these tough times," Minnick said. "Idahoans make tough choices every day. It is time for government to do the same. Identifying and eliminating wasteful spending is an important first step toward balancing future budgets and restoring fiscal discipline."

State Rep. Raul Labrador, R-Eagle, who is challenging Minnick in Minnick's bid for re-election, wasn't immediately available for comment on the bill.

Minnick had 32 co-sponsors for his original bill, all, like Minnick, members of the "Blue Dog Coalition" of conservative Democrats in the House.

Haas said the administration contacted Minnick's office "saying that they wanted to submit language to Congress and that they were interested in using our bill as the framework." Meetings followed that included Minnick and staffers, and then the White House sent its new version of the bill to the House leadership. As is customary, the chairman of the relevant committee, Rep. John Spratt, D-S.C., chairman of the House Budget Committee, is listed as the lead sponsor on behalf of the administration.

Haas said it's uncommon for the administration to pick up on a freshman's bill like that. "So it's a pretty big deal for us," she said.

She said co-sponsors from both parties are being sought in both the House and Senate, and prospects for the bill's passage are good. "I think you'll find bipartisan support in Congress for reduced spending and restoring fiscal discipline," she said. "It's something that is near and dear to Walt, but near and dear to others also."

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