**Issue Of The Week: March 1, 2004**

## A Platter Full Of Technology 'Pork'

by K. Daniel Glover

When **John McCain** went on the Senate floor in January for one of his regular rants against "pork barrel" spending, the Arizona Republican focused his ire on the types of special-interest earmarks that have outraged budget watchers for decades. He decried the $1 million for the Mormon cricket infestation in Utah, $238,000 for the National Wild Turkey Federation and $200,000 to North Pole, Alaska, for what McCain called "elves and others."

But crickets, turkeys and imaginary elves aside, much of the money that lawmakers earmark for their states and districts these days goes toward technology-related projects. The projects that McCain did not specifically mention include $3 million for the Center for Criminal Justice Technology in Maryland, $2.75 million for the Nogales CyberPort Project in McCain's home state, and $2 million for computer training of at-risk youth at the Boys and Girls Clubs of America in Atlanta.

*National Journal's Technology Daily* reviewed the spending bills and conference reports for fiscal 2004 and identified hundreds of such earmarks (part 1, part 2) involving information technology, telecommunications and related fields. The projects range in value from as little as $16,000 for interactive displays at the National Distance Running Hall of Fame to $9.4 million for an information-sharing database in the South Carolina Judicial Department, and many of them have multimillion-dollar price tags.

All told, the value approaches the $1 billion mark -- and could exceed it if vague earmarks for "equipment," "upgrades," "research" and the like were counted.

### Steering Innovation To The Public

Lawmakers' emphasis on steering money toward technology projects back home appears to be recent, according to an analysis of the annual *Pig Book* produced by Citizens Against Government Waste. A search of several tech-related terms in the group's databases yielded limited hits from fiscal 1995 through fiscal 1998. The number started climbing in fiscal 1999, however, and has soared since then.

"It's probably just more of a function of technology being more widely available," said **David Williams**, vice president of policy for the group. He noted, for instance, that "nanotechnology is huge now" and that the field simultaneously "has really exploded as pork-barrel spending."

"Good," Virginian **George Allen** said of the nanotech earmarks. The former chairman of the Senate Republican High-Tech Task Force acknowledges an affinity for tech-related projects. He said he and his aides review "literally thousands" of aid requests every year, and because he chooses those that he believes will have the greatest impact on jobs, education, research and other priorities, technology often is involved.

Though projects must have a "salutary purpose" before Allen pushes them, he said, "if the word nanotech is in it or aeronautics or technology generally, yes ... that does add more interest."

Two other Virginians, Democrat **Rick Boucher** and Republican **Bob Goodlatte**, also see value in tech earmarks. They are the House's co-chairmen of the Congressional Internet Caucus.

Boucher boasts that his district, according to federal data, has "the most telemedicine sites" in the country, in part because of his advocacy. And in fiscal 2004, Goodlatte touted his role in securing $520,000 for a "smart" operating room at Carilion Health System to remotely connect surgeons for consultations. "It brings Internet telecommunications technology into the operating room, and I think it's a very productive thing," Goodlatte said.

"This is not Congress picking one technology over another and directing federal funds in a way that's anti-competitive or would diminish a more promising technology's opportunity to break through ... all of which I think would be very questionable," Boucher said of tech earmarks. "This is simply to take a well-known and established technology that provides documented

societal benefits and obtain the dollars that are necessary to deploy [it] to people who need it."

**Corruption Of The Budgetary System?**

Not everyone sees the trend as positive, however. While Williams said Citizens Against Government Waste is a strong advocate of information technology within government and has even criticized the government for not using technology effectively, he bemoaned the fact that so many projects are approved without proper budgetary review.

"Technology is a good thing, pork-barrel spending is a bad thing, and we don't look at the merits of the project when we put it into our database," he said. He cited the trend toward nanotech projects as an example. "That may be the wave of the future, but it still should go through the competitive process. ... Each project represents a corruption of the process."

**James Savage**, a University of Virginia professor and author of *Funding Science in America: Congress, Universities and the Politics of the Academic Pork Barrel*, has been particularly critical of "academic earmarks" for science and research. Data that he presented at a 2001 science and technology forum showed that the number of such earmarks jumped from $16 million in 1980 to more than $1 billion in 2000. In a telephone interview last week, he said the trend has worsened since then.

"The amount of [academic] earmarks is so great that people are no longer calculating it anymore," Savage said.

He blames the university community more than the politicians, arguing that academics are skirting the peer-review process they created. Academic earmarks "are corrupting the system," Savage said, "and the system was set up by academics to insulate science from politics. ... These are our values; these are our norms. They are not the norms of Congress."

Some Democrats also have decried the growth in earmarks -- technology and others. This year, the minority of the House Appropriations Committee issued a report lambasting the GOP as "Grand Old Porkers." The review noted that 100 percent of the money for "intelligent transportation systems" was earmarked in fiscal 2003, giving the executive branch "no discretion at all" to fund its choice of projects like computerized traffic signals.

Democrats also criticized the number of earmarks for "economic development initiatives," which this year include many tech-related projects. And they condemned the phenomenal growth in earmarks for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration -- an agency that as recently as fiscal 1995 was the subject of only two earmarks. (There were nearly 150 this year, many of them technology oriented.)

**Rewards Of The 'Transgressors'**

Republicans who 10 years ago rode to victory a "Contract With America" that promised a line-item veto aimed at earmarks now dismiss criticisms of the process that they oversee. "I'm tired of the earmarks story," said **John Scofield**, the majority spokesman for House Appropriations. He argued that Democrats "have been all over the map on this issue."

"You can argue all you want about earmarks," Scofield said. "The fundamental defense is [the Constitution] ... which clearly gives the power of the purse to Congress."

That mindset is exactly what leaves critics like Savage downcast about the chances of change. "The battles have been fought and lost," he said, noting that no one has filled the shoes of earmarking foes like Reps. **George Brown** of California and **William Natcher** of Kentucky since their deaths years ago.

Even worse, he said, "there are no incentives against earmarking," either in Congress or the academic community. "I think the cat's out of the bag. I think it's too late. ... The transgressors are rewarded for transgressing."