

The \$1.1T bill: School lunches, light bulbs, pot

The Associated Press

School kids, truckers, marijuana smokers and fans of old-fashioned light bulbs are among the millions of people who had something extra riding on the big spending bill passed by Congress to keep the government running.

The \$1.1 trillion measure approved by the Senate on Saturday night and sent to President Barack Obama is mostly about spending choices, such as adding \$5.4 billion to fight the Ebola virus or trimming the Environmental Protection Agency’s budget by \$60 million. But it’s also packed with a mishmash of policy add-ons known as riders, many of which couldn’t get through Congress on their own.

Some things the bill would affect:

INTERNET TAXES

Extends a freeze on state and local internet access taxes to Oct. 1, 2015.

SCHOOL LUNCHES

Eases rules requiring more whole grains in school lunches and suspends the lower sodium standards due to take effect in 2017, while keeping other healthy eating rules. Some school nutrition directors — and some students complaining of yucky lunches — lobbied for a

break from the standards championed by first lady Michelle Obama.

TRUCK SAFETY

Rolls back safety rules that were supposed to keep sleepy truckers from causing wrecks. The government’s rules had effectively shortened truckers’ maximum workweek from 82 hours to 70. The trucking industry fought back.

BANKING

Loosens rules imposed after the 2008 financial crisis. The change relaxes regulation of high-risk investments known as derivatives; those rules were imposed to reduce risk to depositors’ federally insured money and prevent more taxpayer bailouts. Banks said the crackdown stifled the competitiveness of the U.S. financial industry.

MARIJUANA

Offers a mixed bag for pot smokers. The bill blocks the Justice Department from raiding medical marijuana dispensaries in states that permit them. But it also blocks federal and local spending to legalize marijuana in Washington, D.C., where voters approved recreational use in a November referendum. It’s unclear what the practical effect of the spending ban will be.

PENSIONS

Allows some pension plans to cut benefits promised to current and future retirees. The change is designed to save some financially strapped plans from going broke. It applies to multiemployer plans, which cover more than 10 million people mostly at small, unionized employers, often in the construction business.

CAMPAIGN MONEY

Allows more money to flow into political parties. Under the new rules, each superrich donor could give almost \$1.6 million per election cycle to political parties and their campaign committees. The comparable limit for 2014’s elections was \$194,400.

THE SAGE GROUSE

Says “no” to putting the greater sage grouse and three related birds on the endangered species list. Environmentalists say time to save them is running out as their sagebrush habitat disappears. But oil and gas companies and other businesses argued that protecting the chicken-sized birds on Western lands would hurt business and local economies.

LIGHT BULBS

Attempts to switch off federal rules that are making it harder to find old-fashioned incandescent bulbs. The bill extends a ban on

the government spending money to enforce the ongoing phase-out of incandescent bulbs. It may not have much effect, since manufacturers and stores are already well-along in the switch to spiral bulbs and other energy-saving alternatives.

HUNTING AND FISHING

Prohibits the EPA from regulating lead in ammunition or fishing tackle. Lead in fishing sinkers and bullet fragments are being blamed for poisoning birds, such as loons and the endangered California condor. Republicans said EPA regulation would be overreach and just the threat of it was making it hard to find bullets in stores.

OFFICIAL PORTRAITS:

Continues a ban on spending money on portraits of Cabinet secretaries, Congress members and other big shots, a Washington tradition that some lawmakers felt had gotten out of hand.

THE CAPITOL DOME:

Topping it all off, spends \$21 million to continue restoration of the leaky, cracked U.S. Capitol dome.

Have environmentalists lost credibility?

by Robert Hirning

We owe a great debt of gratitude to the men and women who have come forth in the past and made a major impact on protecting our nation’s (and planet’s) environment. John Muir (founder of the Sierra Club) set up our National Park System over a hundred years ago, protecting millions of acres of our most beautiful mountains, valleys and canyon lands and Theodore Roosevelt greatly expanded it, a quarter century later. David Brower, Justice William O. Douglas and Stewart Udall all picked up the cause in the 1960s to further protect America’s wilderness from roads, dams and other development. Rachel Carson’s 1962 book *Silent Spring* focused attention on the over use of DDT and other toxic chemicals and earned her posthumously the Presidential Medal of Freedom. Pete Seeger launched the Hudson River Sloop “Clearwater” in 1969 and with it the successful campaign to clean up the horribly polluted Hudson River. A fledgling environmental group in Russia went all the way to the Kremlin to successfully lobby for protection of Lake Baikal. Putin himself ordered the relocation of a proposed petroleum pipeline surveyed dangerously close to this pristine lake, which actually contains

20% of the planets fresh water!

But in recent years, the movement seems to have lost its way. Public and private pronouncements by wannabe environmental leaders have tarnished the stellar credibility of the movement. An informal conversation I had with someone connected with a local environmental group did not go well. It was during the driest of last Augusts’ fire season and big fires were breaking out everywhere. This person’s position was that fires should be allowed to burn because it is a natural phenomenon and good for the forest to clean out undergrowth and debris. She pointed out how Native Americans deliberately set fires when they went to lower country in the fall. I tried to point out that very little of that old growth forest is left (not to mention reduced wild life habitat and fisheries) and that the “natural state” has been reduced by human activities such as homes, farms, and second growth plantations, but to no avail. When it became clear that her position was inflexible, the conversation went silent.

So often I hear the reasoning for taking a particular environmental

stand is based on the phrase “they say”. Upon further questioning as to whom “they” are, it usually turns out to have come from someone else’s opinion with little basis in fact. This sort of “party line” pronouncement inevitably leads to a credibility gap. Sometimes there appears to be more pleasure in telling other people what to do than to get anything accomplished. A recent ballot measure, pushed by such fundamentalist extremism, uses the punitive language “prohibit” “enforce” “any” and “all” twenty eight times in a few paragraphs. This does not win votes. Where a measure addressing indiscriminate aerial or roadside spraying might have gained some traction, the initiative to a ban on “any” and “all” pesticides forced such diverse occupations as health care workers, veterinarians, realtors, day care centers and teachers into the opposition camp along with the predictable industrial forest land owners and Public Works officials. This is irresponsible and only undermines future participation of possible allies. The big picture is lost when ego gratification appears to be the goal. “Well I did my part, I bought a hybrid.” Or consider

the wheezing old wreck chugging down the highway in a cloud of blue smoke with a “Save the Planet” bumper sticker on it. If you use firewood and live in a house constructed of wood, how can you go negative every time someone cuts a tree down?

The big picture is totally ignored. Small cadres of people, maybe less than two or three dozen men and women, make decisions to incinerate large portions of the planet on a few minutes’ notice. Untold amounts of resources and trillions of dollars have been spent over the last fifty years to set up this system which will result in immense environmental and human damage, yet environmentalists are completely silent on the subject. Instead they seem content in worrying about the extinction of a certain species of snail which is potentially threatened by some kind of development. Further in the big picture is the underlying cause of so much development: relentless population growth; again the new environmentalists are silent except for the underlying assumption that the planet would be a lot better off if the rest of us weren’t here.

With a few notable exceptions,

many of today’s environmental organizations see the answer to their never ending battles in petitioning the government to take some action on their behalf. No other point of view or compromise is possible. In today’s “timber wars”, for example, no consideration is ever made to sit down with timber company representatives and hammer out an agreement. Organized labor learned early that collective bargaining was effective and that the government was never going to be an arbiter. In fact, in the example of timber issues, the Forest Service would like nothing better than for the two sides to say, “Hey we worked out an agreement, now help us implement it,” but in a climate of never ending confrontation that will never happen.

If the above issues continue down the same path, more and more people, including this writer, will become disillusioned with the movement. A loss of credibility leads immediately to cynicism and the movement’s former strength begins to dissolve. Soon most people will no longer take environmentalists seriously; I sure won’t either.



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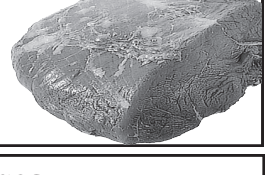
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