



Free Press Viewpoint

Secrecy provision sneaks into farm bill

It's a legislative horror story, really.

Last year, Senate and House conferees inserted a provision in the new Farm Bill closing records of most business between the Department of Agriculture and farmers.

About the only thing you can find out about a farmer's relationship with the government is how much federal money he or she got last year. This means farmers will continue to show up on embarrassing lists put out by environmental groups.

But a lot of information that used to be public will be behind a screen of secrecy, thanks to this bill.

That may or may not be a good idea. Our view is that farmers have nothing to hide, and the details of their interaction with the government - while of little interest to most of us might as well be out in the open. That's how public business ought to be done.

Closing records, however, is keeping county tax assessors from finding out whether farm land qualifies for lower assessment rates. Assessors say that makes their job more difficult and forces them sometimes to just use the higher rate until a landowner protests. So the change is causing some problems for farmers, too.

Otherwise, the issue is open to debate, and we'd like to report that Congress had one.

It didn't, though.

The secrecy proposal never went through hearings. Citizens had no chance to protest or complain or praise the proposal. Lobbyists for most groups never heard it was coming It bypassed the normal legislative process.

Then when the compromise Farm Bill came back to the floor, the train was a rollin' and no one wanted to be in the way. No floor debate. No notice, really, of this small provision in among hundreds of pages.

How did this happen when Congress has a system for handling legislation, you ask?

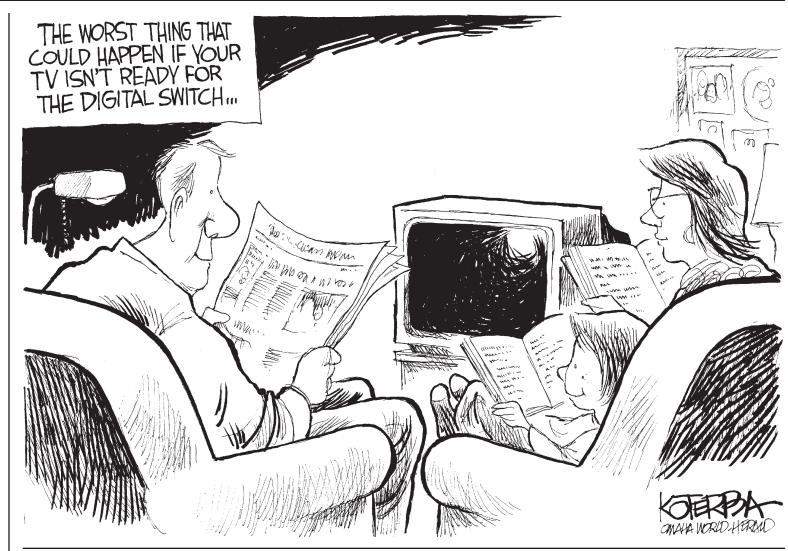
Well, Congress does have a system. It's full of loopholes. Many state legislatures work the same, Kansas among them. Whole bills can be inserted into a law at the conference stage with little or no notice, no debate, no chance for opposition.

It's bad government, bad lawmaking, but it happens all the time. The system is short-circuited, the citizens are cheated.

To make matters worse, our own Rep. Jerry Moran reportedly was on this conference committee. He has yet to make any statement on the issue, that we know of.

This is the same kind of poor lawmaking that got Kansas strict requirements for carnival inspections that could put our home-owned carnivals out of business. There was no debate on that bill, either; no chance to tell why it could be a disaster for rural Kansas.

Our legislative process — state and federal — is broken. It will be flawed until legislators give up this awful loophole of theirs and pass rules that make all proposals go through the committee process, public hearings and a chance for opponents to speak.



Federal money is 'sin tax' for schools

"I bought a lottery ticket to support education!" is the last comment some teachers want to hear.

It can make us so mad we want to heave back a blackboard eraser at them - the eraser being the total benefits a school may get from such taxes.

Fortunately, Kansas is not a state that dedicates the proceeds to just education, but sends gambling revenues to the general fund that underwrites everything. However, K-12 schooling still gets half of that "everything," and gambling revenues are dropping like a stone.

That is surprising. Gambling is generally a tax on the "mathematically challenged" - the chances of "winning big" being the chance of being hit by lightning...twice. Nevertheless, money from the lottery and other gambling is dropping off in tough economic times, when there may be nothing left after we buy food, fuel, and medicine.

And don't leave out cigarettes and alcohol. For some reason, legislators who take a "no new taxes" stance never hesitate to increase taxes on gambling, tobacco and booze. "Sin taxes," being perceived as a good way to discourage these behaviors and compensate for increased medical costs, seem to be an exception to the "no new taxes" pledge.

or gambling decreases, so does the tax rev- the Feds have to impose educational policy is

John Richard Schrock

 Education Frontlines

Kansas is fortunate in not having tied gambling revenue directly to education funding. In states that do, legislators often take the attitude that since education is benefitting from that cash stream, they can trim the contribution to education from general taxes even more.

enue.

The bottom line is: if something is worth paying for, whether education or health care, it is worth funding directly. It should not be tied to sin taxes on behaviors that could easily change.

But the worst sin tax of all is one that an average taxpayer has no choice in paying: the federal tax money spent for No Child Left Behind. It is a sin tax because of the addiction and extortion involved in distributing it, and the terrible educational devastation this law is causing.

Since education is not in the U.S Constitu-We are now discovering that if the smoking tion, it is a "state's right." The only mechanism

to tie it to federal grants for free school lunches and other programs. States have become so addicted to this federal money that they have relinquished most of their educational jurisdiction.

Washington essentially holds each state hostage. No state wants to give up its "fair share" to reclaim education independence. Nebraska would forfeit \$70 million. Kansas would lose its \$150 million each year. Texas would lose a cool billion. In these hard times, no state can afford to get out of this federal extortion.

Meanwhile, our best teachers take early retirement. High-performing college students choose any field but teaching. Average and good students languish while schools shift resources to the impossible task of getting all low-performers up to minimal proficiency by 2014. And schools slowly turn into test-preparation prisons. These are truly "sins" that harm future generations. They make smoking and gambling look trivial.

As individuals, we can stop smoking. We can stop gambling. But we can't stop paying taxes. This is one "sin" that we can completely lay on the shoulders of our elected representatives in Washington.

John Richard Schrock, a professor of biology and department chair at a leading teacher's college, lives in Emporia. He emphasizes that his opinions are strictly his own.

In a democracy such as ours, where the people are supposed to be partners in government, that's just the way it should be.

We'd like to see our Congressman leading the charge. What about it. Mr. Moran?

Steve Haynes

(785) 462-3963

COLBY FREE PRESS

155 W. Fifth St. Colby, Kan. 67701

۲

fax (785) 462-7749

Send news to: colby.editor @ nwkansas.com

(USPS 120-920)

State award-winning newspaper, General Excellence, Design & Layout, Columns, Editorial Writing, Sports Columns, News, Photography. Official newspaper of Thomas County, Colby, Brewster and Rexford.

> Steve Haynes - Publisher s.haynes @ nwkansas.com

NEWS

Andy Heintz - Sports Reporter งheintz @ nwk nsas.com

Marian Ballard - Copy Editor nballard @ nwkansas.coi

Marj Brown, Vera Sloan - Society Editors colby.society @ nwkansas.com

ADVERTISING

Jasmine Stewart - Advertising Manager j.stewart @ nwkansas.com

Heather Woofter - Advertising Sales hwoofter @ nwkansas.com

Tyler Zolinski - Graphic Design zolinski @ nwkan

Jessica Estes - Classified Ad Desk estes @ nwkansas.com

BUSINESS OFFICE

Tammy Withers - Office Manager withers @ nwkansas.con

Evan Barnum - Systems Administrator support @ nwkansas.com

NOR'WEST PRESS

Jim Bowker - General Manager Richard Westfahl, Lana Westfahl, Jim Jackson, Betty Morris, James Ornelas, Barbara Ornelas, Tasha Shores, Elizabeth Brock

THE COLBY FREE PRESS (USPS 120-920) is published every Monday, Wednesday Thursday and Friday, except the days observed for Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day, by Nor'West Newspaper, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701.

PERIODICALS POSTAGE paid at Colby, Kan. 67701, and at additional mailing offices POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Colby Free Press, 155 W. Fifth St., Colby, Kan., 67701

THE BUSINESS OFFICE at 155 W. Fifth is open from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday to Friday, closed Saturday and Sunday. MEMBER OF THE ASSOCIATED PRESS, which is exclusively entitled to the use for publication of all news herein. Member Kansas Press Association and National Newspaper Association.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES: In Colby by carrier: 4 months \$40, 8 months \$56, 12 months \$74. By mail within Colby and the nine-county region of Thomas, Sheridan, Decatur, Rawlins, Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Logan and Gove counties: 4 months \$53, 8 months \$65, 12 months \$82. Other Kansas counties: 4 months \$60, 8 months \$70, 12 months \$85. All other states. \$85. 12 months.

Schools may score with new secretary

President-elect Barack Obama has finished putting together his cabinet, which includes a new secretary of education, Arne Duncan.

This appointment will likely mean some modest changes that could bear fruit down the road-and certainly more federal spending on what has traditionally been a matter for state and local governments.

Mr. Duncan is superintendent of the Chicago Public Schools. With roughly 410,000 students, it is the third-largest district in the country. By comparison, just under 419,000 students attend grades 1 through 12 in Kansas public schools.

What does the new secretary think about some of the key issues in education?

The biggest issue facing federal lawmakers is No Child Left Behind, President George Bush's landmark education reform. Duncan has taken all sides of the issue.

He supports the concept of the law, which appeals to the law's backers. But he also favors giving states more flexibility in how they comply, which appeals to school district managers as well as some political conservatives. He also favors doubling the money (currently \$28 billion) that the federal government spends on the law. That appeals to teacher unions.

The law requires schools to make progress towards "proficiency" for all students by 2014, but states create their own standards. Some have dumbed-down the standards, which has helped more schools comply. Duncan advocates a national standard, but that would take the federal government further into the education business, which is not a wise idea.

To his credit, Duncan has been a reformer in teacher pay and recruitment. Some Chicago schools participate in a pilot program to give

۲

John R. LaPlante Flint Hill Center

Other

Opinions

teachers bonuses tied to student performance. That's the good news. He also has, however, pushed Chicago teachers to get certificated by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards. Teachers who go through that program get a pay increase, but whether it actually increases their effectiveness is an open question.

Duncan has also been a fan of Teach for America, a national program that places liberal arts graduates in urban schools. Over 300 of its graduates, whose training is a refreshing alternative to the often stultifying schools of education, have taught in Chicago Public Schools.

The Flint Hills Center for Public Policy has consistently called for Kansas to be smarter in the way it uses charter schools, which are public schools that have some freedom from district and state laws. Duncan is a fan of charter schools.

One key part of the charter school model is that no school should be allowed to fail year after year. If a charter school doesn't live up to its end of the bargain, it's closed. Duncan has acted on this logic, closing failing schools, sometimes re-opening them with new staff as charter schools. Sometimes that's the best way to deal with persistent failure.

pay dividends down the road. The first is to create smaller schools, which have been shown to boost student achievement.

The second reform is "weighted student funding," a method of budgeting that cuts out some school district overhead by giving more responsibility to principals.

How much influence will Duncan have? It's hard to say. Much depends on what members of Congress think, the people who fill the subordinate positions in the Department of Education, and what the permanent bureaucracy does.

Over 90 percent of all school money is allocated by state and local government, which means that Kansas lawmakers and citizens still have a significant say in what happens in the state. In a federal system, that's the way it should be.

John R. LaPlante is an education policy fellow with the Wichita-based Flint Hills Center for Public Policy. A complete bio can be found at www.flinthills.org/content/view/24/39/, and he can be reached at john.laplante@flinthills. org. To learn more about the Flint Hills Center, please visit www.flinthills.org.

The Colby Free Press encourages Letters to the Editor on any topic of general interest. Letters should be brief, clear and to the point. They must be signed and carry the address and phone number of the author.

We do not publish anonymous letters. We sign our opinions and expect readers to do likewise. Nor do we run form letters or letters about topics which do not pertain to our area. Thank-yous from this area should be submitted

Duncan favors two other reforms that could to the Want Ad desk.



 Bruce Tinsley