

Googling the Feds: Make the Federal bureaucracy searchable and transparent

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THE PUGNACIOUS, PORK-BUSTING Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) has been working to combat government waste for years. Now he's leading the charge on a bill that would mandate "full disclosure of all entities and organizations receiving federal funds" on the Web. It's a great idea.

Information about federal funding is already publicly accessible — but only if you have the brainpower and computing capacity to merge and navigate huge amounts of information. Coburn's new database would let regular folks go to a box on a website, type in an obvious keyword or phrase such as "Sierra Club" or "Boeing" or "Sacramento levee," then get a full record, stretching back 10 years, of how much federal money went to an entity, cause or project, and for exactly what purpose. "Basically, it'll let you Google the federal government," one Coburn aide said.

It's hard to find fault with legislation that promotes such transparency — and it's no surprise that there are enthusiasts on both sides of the aisle, including co-sponsors Sens. Barack Obama (D-Ill.), Thomas R. Carper (D-Del.) and John McCain (R-Ariz.). A refreshingly motley combination of interest groups, including Greenpeace, the Heritage Foundation, the Family Research Council and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, are also onboard.

The bill's primary detractors? Those on Capitol Hill who think that companies that receive government contracts should be exempt from scrutiny, as they would be if the unanimously passed House version of the legislation became law. According to the New York Times, a sponsor of the House bill, Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (R-Va.), explained that grants "are more susceptible to abuse" than contracts, which "are awarded in a much more competitive environment." Any self-respecting budget hawk should scoff at such talk — especially from a legislator whose district is home to many government contractors.

Coburn's subcommittee held a hearing on the idea Tuesday, and his office has said it expects the full Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee to consider the legislation and introduce it on the floor before the August recess. The Senate should pass this bill, combine it with the House version in a way that keeps corporations on the hook, and get it to the president for his signature as soon as possible.

Fiscal conservatives like Coburn hope the new database will hasten the demise of pork-barrel politics. Some progressives have said they also hope it will shed light on all the good work that government does. Either outcome — or, dare we dream, both — would be big wins for participatory democracy.