

Palin's earmarks: Not just for the halibut

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September 10, 2008 05:52 PM EST

<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0908/13353.html>

Senator John McCain recently told reporters that Alaska Governor Sarah Palin has "learned that earmarks are bad."

But not that bad, apparently. According to a "[summary of requests for federal appropriations](#)" posted to her budget office's website earlier this year, Palin requested millions of federal dollars for everything from improving recreational halibut fishing to studying the mating habits of crabs and the DNA of harbor seals.

It's a position at odds with her recasting as an anti-earmarking champion, and with the tone of the biting scorn she's employed toward the budgetary practice this week.

"In just three years our opponent has requested nearly one billion dollars in earmarks. That's nearly a million dollars for every working day," Palin told a crowd in Lebanon, Ohio, Tuesday. "So as we reform the abusive earmarks in our state our opponent was requesting nearly a billion dollars in earmarks as a senatorial privilege as I was vetoing half a billion as an executive responsibility."

Palin's earmark requests aren't unusual, of course. Every self-respecting mayor and governor in America seeks federal dollars for local projects. And Palin has, at times, sounded a cautionary note on earmarks despite the fact that Alaska receives more earmarked federal money per capita than any other state and is unusually reliant on those funds because of its geographic isolation, massive size and extreme climate.

Indeed, in her January state of the state address, Palin said the state "must not rely so heavily on federal government earmarks."

But the document summarizing Palin's earmark requests was created the next month, and it suggested a still-healthy appetite for earmarks. Soon afterward, Palin [wrote an op-ed](#) in a local newspaper outlining her not-so-reticent posture on earmarks.

"My role at the federal level is simply to submit the most well-conceived earmark requests we can," she wrote.

Obama's campaign has responded by challenging Palin's reform credentials.

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"Senator McCain said Governor Palin 'learned that earmarks are bad', but in 2008 alone Gov. Palin requested \$256 million in earmarks for Alaska, and her state received more earmarks per person than any other state," said spokesman Tommy Vietor. "The fact is that Governor Palin isn't just good at getting pork projects, she's one of the most successful pork barrel politicians in history."

Alaska has indeed been spectacularly successful in getting earmarks, largely through the efforts of its senior senator, Ted Stevens, who is now fighting corruption charges. (Stevens' requests include far more than those listed by Palin.) And Palin's office has actively backed some of its legislators' requests, according to the document, which covers requests for the fiscal years of 2008 and 2009.

Her campaign didn't respond directly to the question of whether Palin still supports those specific earmarks, or how she would defend them.

Though McCain has avoided this campaign year saying which earmarks he'd cut from the federal budget, he is recognized in general as a consistent opponent of earmarks who has focused on the cumulative effect of pet projects written into the federal budgets by parochial-minded legislators.

Some on Alaska's list are the kind of uncontroversial projects that make most earmarks hard to cut – even if it's difficult to see their importance to the nation, rather than the state: construction of Alaska National Guard facilities, for instance, to stop drug abuse, and to improve a crime database.

Many others, though, are of exactly the sort that McCain has made a career of mocking—like animal research.

"We're not going to spend \$3 million of your tax dollars to study the DNA of bears in Montana," McCain has said during this year's campaign, referring to a study he's mocked for years of whether grizzlies need to keep their status as an endangered species.

Palin, meanwhile, has requested \$3.2 million to be spent in part researching the "genetics of harbor seals," in one of the state's many requests for federal funding of research into Alaska's fauna.

She's seeking \$1 million, for instance, for a project to investigate rockfish fisheries, a request that, according to the Alaska document, was presented to and refused by Congress last year.

"Our state's economy depends a certain amount on tourism...and there are a lot of charter fishermen who have clients that want to come up fish for halibut, and likewise when they're fishing for halibut they're catching ... rockfish as a by-catch in that fishery," said Cleo Brylinsky, who heads up the rockfish project at the Alaska Department of Fish and

Game. "So it's important to our tourism economy that we have sustainable fisheries and well-managed fisheries," she said.

The rockfish research is one of several requests for federal help studying marine wildlife, which, coming from another candidate, might have drawn McCain's mockery.

Here are a few, with the state's description of the project:

- \$400,000: Alaska Invasive Species Program: Continues to comprehensively prevent, identify, and respond to the threat of invasive species on the Alaska environment.
- \$494,900: Assessment of Recreational Halibut Harvest in Alaska: This is an ongoing effort to collect data on the recreational halibut fishery that is conducted by federal agencies though relying on the state for data.
- \$2 million: Bering Sea Crab Research and Management: Researches Bering Sea crab productivity and sustainability as necessary to restore crab stocks.
- \$3.2 million: Seal and Steller Sea Lion Biological Research: Funds monitoring of ice seal populations in Native villages, research on the species delineation and genetics of harbor seals to understand the declines in population and provide for population restoration, and continues research into Steller Sea Lion population decline.

The McCain-Palin campaign didn't respond to the questions of whether Palin still backs those specific requests, or how she would defend them in light of her opposition to earmarks.

In response to those questions, McCain-Palin spokesman Ben Porritt said the governor believes in "open, transparent, and efficient government" and criticized Obama for making extensive earmark requests.

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