

Interior Department & EPA get \$32 billion spending increase

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Thursday, September 25 approved big budget increases for the Interior Department and the Environmental Protection Agency as it passed a \$32 billion spending measure for the budget year that starts next week.

The measure, passed 77-21, is especially generous with EPA grants to cities and counties for clean and safe drinking water projects. The money would ease a backlog and would, Democrats say, create much-needed infrastructure jobs.

The measure is the sixth of the 12 annual spending bills setting agency operating budgets to have passed the Senate. Like the others, the measure provides significant increases for the programs it covers, including a 33 percent increase for the EPA. The additional money mostly would cover the more than doubling of the budget for water and sewer grants - if money provided in the economic stimulus bill passed in

February isn't included in the calculations.

All told, the bill would provide a 17 percent boost for its programs, including \$2.6 billion for the Forest Service to combat wildfires, a 21 percent increase, and \$4 billion for the Indian Health Service, an 11 percent increase.

The bill contains more than 300 pet projects known as earmarks sought by senators. They total \$246 million, according to Taxpayers for Common Sense, a Washington-based budget watchdog group. Many of those went to local governments to replace water and sewer lines, while others went for improvements at parks and wildlife refuges and to preserve historic structures.

Efforts during the week long debate to kill some earmarks failed by overwhelming margins.

The measure passed with bipartisan support despite protests from Republican conservatives such as Jeff Sessions of Alabama and John Ensign of Nevada, who said it's sim-

ply irresponsible to approve such generous increases while the government is running a huge deficit.

On Thursday, Democrats blocked a vote on an attempt by Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, to block the EPA from issuing regulations during fiscal 2010 to clamp down on carbon dioxide emissions from power plants, factories and other so-called stationary sources.

The EPA just last week took steps to regulate heat-trapping pollution from automobile tailpipes for the first time, and EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson argued before the vote that the Republican effort would also have derailed those efforts.

"Senator Murkowski's amendment would be a death knell to the historic agreement between the President and auto makers to increase gas mileage and reduce emissions from cars and trucks," Jackson said in a statement Wednesday.

The move by Republi-

cans comes as legislation to curb greenhouse gases in the Senate has been delayed.

The measure also contains an unusual earmark by chief bill sponsor Diane Feinstein, D-Calif., to authorize the National Park Service to extend the permit for an oyster farm in the Point Reyes National Seashore. In doing so, Feinstein sided squarely with oyster farmer Kevin Lunny, who had been battling the park service and local environmentalists. They claimed Lunny's oyster farm was harming seals and doing other damage to the pristine Drakes Estero.

But a National Academy of Sciences study released earlier this year said the park service misrepresented facts and exaggerated the operation's negative effect on the environment - which was a key factor in Feinstein's decision to side with Lunny. His permit to raise and harvest oysters in Drakes Bay would be extended until 2022.