

WASHINGTON -- The \$410 billion spending bill now hanging in congressional limbo includes more than \$140 million in earmarks for Nebraska and Iowa, according to an analysis by the watchdog group Taxpayers for Common Sense.

The scores of earmarks set aside for the Midlands include funding for agricultural research, road and bridge projects, sewer upgrades and drug treatment programs.

But the future of those projects is in doubt after Senate Republicans forced Democrats on Thursday night to put off a final vote on the measure until next week.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada said he was one vote short of the 60 needed to close debate and free the bill for President Barack Obama's signature.

Congress needs to pass some form of spending legislation to keep the government running through the end of the fiscal year in September.

The 1,132-page omnibus spending bill, which was crafted mostly over the course of 2008, would award big increases to domestic programs and is stuffed with pet projects sought by lawmakers of both parties.

The measure has extraordinary reach, wrapping together nine spending bills to fund the annual operating budgets of every Cabinet department except Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs.

Nebraska stands to receive \$26.7 million in earmarks and Iowa \$113.8 million.

Both states benefit from having U.S. senators on the Appropriations Committee: Tom Harkin of Iowa and Ben Nelson of Nebraska, both Democrats.

Anti-earmark senators lambasted specific projects, including \$1.8 million that Harkin included for research on the odor from waste at large hog operations.

Harkin gave a spirited defense.

He said the idea of researching pig manure smells might make fodder for late-night comedians, but the problem is no laughing matter for those who find their homes downwind of a large hog operation. Controlling such odors is a critical issue to many rural areas, he said. Harkin is one of the most prolific earmarking senators, with nearly \$99 million worth of earmarks in the bill, excluding multistate projects.

He pointed to news accounts of wasteful no-bid federal contracts that he said are hidden from public view, as opposed to congressional earmarks.

"You know where it's going. People can look at it," Harkin said of earmarks. "With a lot of these no-bid contracts that go through the executive branch, no one knows what they're doing."

Nelson also found himself in the role of earmark defender. His \$866,000 earmark to support stable fly research at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln was ridiculed as "pork" on a cable news network.

He touted the merits of stable fly research and said the latest round of criticism was a typical attack focused on less than 1 percent of the total funding in the legislation. Nelson has about \$23 million of earmarks in the bill, excluding multistate projects. He said wiping out the earmarks would not change the overall cost of the bill -- the money would instead be spent by bureaucrats.

Nebraska's three House members, all Republicans, opposed the spending bill when it was passed in the House.

Two of them, Adrian Smith and Lee Terry, cited the many earmarks in the bill, though each has his name on more than \$1 million in earmarks.

Harkin and Nelson took shots at lawmakers who criticize earmarks, then come asking for their own.

Said Nelson: "It sort of reminds me of the guy walking by the dessert table, bragging about his figure, his weight, knowing he's got three cookies in his pocket to eat later."

The spending bill was written mostly over the course of last year, before projected deficits quadrupled, Obama was elected and his economic stimulus bill was passed.

And though Obama campaigned last year on forcing Congress to curb its earmarks, the bill contains 7,991 pet projects totaling \$5.5 billion, according to the GOP staff of the House Appropriations Committee.

Rep. Steve King, a Republican who represents western Iowa's 5th District, has criticized the "irresponsible spending" in the bill, which includes \$5.6 million of his own earmarks.

He said it's absurd to suggest that receiving even one dollar of meritorious spending obligates a congressman to support wasteful projects: "I will be a fighter for responsible spending and keep that budget as low as I can, but once it's passed, I'm going to fight like crazy to get all the resources I can back to the district."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska's 1st District voted against the bill. Fortenberry, with about \$10 million in earmarks, said he makes a distinction between earmarks and earmark abuse and has offered legislation to increase accountability in the system.

Smith, who represents central and western Nebraska's 3rd District, said his earmarks were "funding of last resort" for transportation projects.

Terry, who said he has long opposed omnibus spending bills, said the earmark process puts lawmakers in a difficult spot. The 2nd District congressman said that he submits only a fraction of the requests he receives and that the ones he backs have some national connection.

For example, Terry requested funding for sewer separation projects in Omaha. He said that was appropriate because the city is seeking to bring its sewers into compliance with unfunded federal mandates.

