

Testimony of Senator Johnny Isakson

Senate Budget Committee Hearing on Biennial Budgeting November 4, 2015

- Chairman Enzi, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the Biennial Budgeting and Appropriations Act, S.150.
- This is bipartisan, commonsense legislation that would change the paradigm of Washington's broken budget system by moving to a system where we pass a two-year budget and appropriations bills, leaving more time to conduct oversight of federal programs.
- With our national debt surpassing \$18 trillion and growing, it is imperative that we rethink the way that we do things in Congress.
- If we continue with the current crisis-driven process – more continuing resolutions, government shutdown threats, and massive omnibus bills that get dropped in front of us at the last minute with no opportunity for amendment – nothing is going to change.
- We need to do what American taxpayers do back at home – they sit around the kitchen table, set their priorities, make their funding predictable, and from time to time, they go back and look at where they're spending the money and see if they can improve it.
- We need to get back to the business of spending within our means. We need to focus on saving, rather than spending.
- We also need to conduct more vigorous oversight of the programs we already have. In a crisis-driven budget and appropriations process, oversight often gets left out.
- Time and time again, oversight allows us find dollars that we didn't realize that we had. For example, I serve as Chairman of the Veterans' Affairs Committee and we faced a cost overrun of more than 400 percent of the Denver hospital. I led the effort to make sure that every dollar of the cost overrun was paid for out of existing VA funds. At first, VA said they couldn't possibly do this, but in the end, we were able to work with them to find the money.

- Oversight is especially important for the three out of every five federal dollars that now go to mandatory programs. In fact, only about one third of the federal budget goes through the current appropriations process.
- Some of the things we've been funding for 40 or 50 years, we probably don't need to be doing anymore. And some things we are not doing, we probably need to be doing. Oversight brings this to light.
- There are several approaches to biennial budgeting. All of them would be a major improvement over our current system.
- My bill, S.150, directs Congress to do appropriations in the odd-numbered years and oversight in the even-numbered years. I like this idea because it means that when members of Congress are running for re-election, we are focusing more on what we're saving the American taxpayer, and less on what we spend to try to impress them to get their vote one more time.
- Some have suggested that a 2-year budget cycle is too long to plan for. If things change, however, we can always do a supplemental appropriation. Also, S.150 preserves the option of a revised budget resolution that could provide further reconciliation instructions.
- When you look at the record of the last few years, I think it is increasingly clear that the current budget process is not serving the interest of the Senate or of American taxpayers.
- I've pushed biennial budgeting every year I've been in the Senate since 2005. Two years ago, we had a vote in which 68 members of the Senate endorsed this concept.
- I'm pleased to be able to say that a quarter of the Senate is cosponsoring S. 150, including the Chairman and nine other bipartisan members of this Committee.
- I believe budget reform is an idea whose time has come. It's time we ran our country like you run your home. It's time our agencies are held accountable. It's time our appropriations weren't just idle promises. It's time oversight was the rule of law in the U.S. Senate.
- I thank the Committee for hearing my testimony and I look forward to working with you to build a better budget process.