Ala reps add defense money that could help state

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BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Capitol Hill is supposed to be an earmark-free zone this year but a slew of amendments to a defense bill, including several from three Alabama Republicans, increase spending for things that are likely to happen in their districts.

Unlike a classic earmark, the amendments don't expressly direct which military installation or defense contractor is to receive the money. But government watchdog groups are suspicious nevertheless because in many cases they have just enough detail to link them to the congressman's home turf.

Stung by criticism that earmarking the federal budget for special local projects led to wasteful spending, the new Republican majority banished the practice for the fiscal year 2012 spending bills. The GOP hailed the ban as a return to government spending based on merit, not raw political power.

But when the House Armed Services Committee was putting the finishing touches on its defense policy bill recently, more than 100 amendments were added in quick voice votes, many of which increase funding for a specific Pentagon account.

"They do smack of a lot of the same characteristics as earmarks," said Steve Ellis, vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense. "But the question will be, 'Does it de facto work like an earmark or is it different?'"

Alabama has three Republican members of the committee, and all three joined in the flurry of amendments.

U.S. Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Saks, had four amendments moving about $37 million into the Research, Development, Testing and Evaluation account for the U.S. Army. The areas of research his amendments target just happen to coincide with military projects already in Alabama: missile defense and tanks.

Rogers said his amendments are about boosting the budgets of defense programs he believes are important to national security, not serving parochial interests.

"I'm glad Huntsville is a missile defense center but frankly if it were in Tennessee, it would still be an important role for a member of the House Armed Services Committee strategic forces subcommittee to pursue those policies in legislative language," Rogers said in an interview in his Capitol Hill office.

Rogers argued the RDT&E account for the U.S. Army was underfunded in the president's

requested budget, and that while Pentagon leadership had to go along with it, he has heard from others in the Department of Defense who want the extra money for research and development. While Rogers said he would not lobby the Pentagon to spend the added money in Alabama, he does expect a full report on exactly where it goes.

Rogers' amendments include $6.25 million for development of missile simulation technology; $1.5 million for development of novel lightweight composite packaging and structural materials; $4.3 million for base defense counter fire intercept systems; and $25 million for the M1A1 Abrams tank engine technology. The Anniston Army Depot in Rogers' district, for example, refurbishes tanks.

Earmark proponents, including those in the Alabama delegation, say Congress has a constitutional right to appropriate money how it sees fit. And tradition has been that members use the earmarks to win plaudits from voters for bringing home the bacon. But it's not quite the same to claim credit for an amendment that may or may not benefit their congressional district.

Rep. Mo Brooks, R-Huntsville, said he obviously would prefer that the $40 million he added to the defense bill for road construction at growing military installations go to benefit Redstone Arsenal in his district, but there was no guarantee.

"I do not have the control," Brooks said. A press release that Brooks issued about the legislation said his amendment would help bases "like" Redstone.

He also added $2.5 million for advanced aviation technology, or more specifically, research on unmanned helicopters. Several defense contractors with offices in north Alabama are working on such vehicles.

"I would expect a half-dozen places around the country, maybe more, are in a position to compete for that research and development effort," Brooks said. "I hope the best price and service provider will come from the Tennessee Valley, but that's not my call."

There are also amendments that didn't involve money. Another Rogers amendment would require the Pentagon notify Congress of any changes Boeing makes to its air refueling tanker and how the cost of the change is different from the company's winning contract proposal. The Alabama delegation was unhappy when Boeing beat EADS in the tanker contract competition.

And Brooks had an amendment that would allow higher production rates at Prototype Integration Facilities like the one at Redstone, "thereby allowing Tennessee Valley contractors to perform greater workloads," he said in his press release about the amendment.

Rep. Martha Roby, R-Montgomery, had four amendments shifting $38 million into Army, National Guard and Navy funds. Among them is $6 million for better software for Army helicopter pilots, which coincides with work done at Fort Rucker in her district, the home to

Army helicopter training. She also added $20 million to the military construction budget for Army training, hoping that a proposed facility at Fort Rucker to train helicopter pilots how to survive a water crash is the beneficiary.

A spokesman for Roby said her amendments address shortfalls in the Pentagon budget for things that the military says it needs, and that she will not pressure the DOD about specific projects or contractors.

"We don't have to because these requests already have support in the Pentagon. That's why we support them," said Stephen Boyd, Roby's chief of staff.

The Republican leadership of the House Armed Services Committee argued the amendments do not violate the moratorium on earmarks because they were vetted by staff and the money attached to them must be spent by the Pentagon based on merit or competition.

"If DOD chooses to violate the law and the text of a provision in the (National Defense Authorization Act) requiring merit based selection, the Armed Services Committee will take them to task," said Rep. Howard "Buck" McKeon, R-Calif., and chairman of the committee.

Earmark critics say they've already found that many of the committee's amendments match exactly or are similar to projects that were earmarks in previous budgets. Recent rule changes in Congress had made earmarking more open by disclosing exactly which member put the project in the legislation and where the money was going, and they say the committee's amendments last month are step backward.

"It's actually a reversal from the rules on transparency," said Leslie Paige, spokeswoman for the Citizens Against Government Waste.

Equally alarming to the anti-earmark crowd is how the committee came up with the money in the amendments. About $1 billion was cut from other parts of the defense bill and collected into a new account called the Mission Force Enhancement Transfer Fund, from which the committee members transferred the money to pay for their amendments. About $700 million of it was taken out for the amendments, and the House later voted to eliminate the remaining $300 million.

In a critical letter to the committee leaders, earmark opponent Sen. Claire McCaskill, D-Missouri, called it a slush fund.

"It was just a big cash cow to fund all of these other little projects," Ellis said.

The defense policy bill passed the U.S. House May 26.

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