

**Idaho Falls Post Register, Thursday, March 18, 2010 — by Nick Draper**

## **Otter: No contradiction here in Idaho**

BOISE -- The same day Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter signed a bill requiring Idaho's attorney general to challenge any federal law that would require individuals to purchase health insurance, Congress passed a measure awarding Idaho more money for its Medicaid program.

On Wednesday afternoon, Otter signed into law the Idaho Health Freedom Act, which compels the state to sue the federal government if Congress and the president approve a health care plan that requires Idahoans to purchase insurance. "What the Idaho Health Freedom Act says is that the citizens of our state won't be subject to another federal mandate or turn over another part of their life to government control," Otter said. "I put a real high priority on the sovereignty of Idaho."

On Wednesday morning, the U.S. Senate passed a bill that includes a provision extending the enhanced federal medical assistance percentage, known as FMAP, which Idaho uses to pay most of its Medicaid bills. At the bill signing ceremony, Otter insisted there isn't a contradiction between rejecting the notion of a federal health insurance mandate while also gladly accepting more federal money for Medicaid. "Bashing (the federal government) is hardly what we're doing here," Otter said.

Otter also noted that Idaho taxpayers send \$6 billion a year to the federal government but would be better off if some of it returned without a multitude of rules and regulations. Yet Senate Minority Leader Kate Kelly, D-Boise, said it's common for Republicans in the Statehouse to decry the expansion of federal government but to accept money that flows to Idaho from Washington, D.C. "That is the contradiction of this body," she said. "We get a tremendous amount of money from the federal government to pay for a variety of programs."

Regardless of party affiliation, most legislators appeared to agree that the FMAP increase is good news for Idaho. "Obviously, that is certainly a relief," said Sen. Dean Cameron, a Rupert Republican who's a co-chair of the Joint Finance-Appropriation Committee, the Legislature's budget-writing body.

When Congress passed the stimulus package last year, it boosted Idaho's FMAP rate from about 70 percent to 80 percent, meaning the federal government pays 80 cents for every dollar spent on Medicaid bills. The increase was set to expire Dec. 31, so Otter recommended setting aside \$71.4 million in state "rainy day" money to offset a potential increase in Idaho's share of Medicaid funding.

But Congress' action Wednesday extended that expiration date to June 30, 2011, meaning Idaho won't have to start paying more for its Medicaid program until fiscal year 2012 at the earliest. Even though it would seem like Idaho has an extra \$71.4 million available, Cameron said there's no plan to revisit budget bills to insert more money for agencies such as public schools or the Idaho Department of Health and Welfare. That's because the FMAP rate will drop at some point, and Cameron said Idaho needs as much money as possible to bridge that gap. "I think there's still a desire to hold onto that (\$71.4 million)," he said. Kelly, though, said there should be at least a discussion about tapping that money to lessen the massive budget cuts facing state agencies next fiscal year. "There's all kinds of things we could do," she said. "Seventy-one million dollars is a lot of teachers."