

March 29, 2010

Conservationists Blast Obama Recess Appointment Of Chief Ag Negotiator

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Already facing criticism from Republicans for making appointments while the Senate is on recess, President Barack Obama is facing fire from conservationists who say his nomination of Islam Siddiqui as chief agricultural negotiator is a “step backward.”

Obama recess-appointed 15 nominees over the weekend he said had waited an average of seven months to be confirmed by the Senate, bypassing lawmakers for the first time since he took office. “I simply cannot allow partisan politics to stand in the way of the basic functioning of government,” he said.

The move prompted Senate Republican Conference Chairman Lamar Alexander of Tennessee to accuse the president of “ramming things through” the process of checks and balances provided by the Senate.

“What the president has done here is throw fuel on the fire at a time when the civil--when the debate about politics is a very angry debate to begin with,” Alexander said on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

The administration said in its announcement that former President George W. Bush made 15 recess appointments at the same stage in his presidency in 2002. At the time, Bush “was not facing the same level of obstruction,” the administration said, and had only five nominees pending on the Senate floor, while Obama has 77 nominees pending.

Republicans are most concerned with Obama’s recess appointment of Craig Becker as a member of the National Labor Relations Board. They contend that Becker, a lawyer with the AFL-CIO and the Service Employees International Union, would make it easier for workers to form unions.

On Monday, however, conservationists singled out another nominee. The Center for Biological Diversity warned that Siddiqui’s appointment to be chief agricultural negotiator in the office of the U.S. trade representative “ensures the perpetuation of pesticide- and fossil-fuel-intensive policies.”

Siddiqui’s confirmation in the Senate was opposed by more than 80 environmental, small-farm and consumer groups, the Center for Biological Diversity said, because of his work as a pesticide lobbyist. Siddiqui is currently vice president of science and regulatory affairs at CropLife America, a trade group of biotech and pesticide companies.

Siddiqui served different positions during the Clinton administration, including undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs at the Department of Agriculture. Since 2004, he has served on the Commerce Department’s advisory committee that advises the U.S. trade representative and the commerce secretary on issues related to trade of chemical and pharmaceutical products.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, Siddiqui oversaw the development of the first national

organized labeling standards “which allowed sewage sludge-fertilized, genetically modified, and irradiated food to be labeled as organic before public outcry forced more stringent standards.” He has also criticized the European Union’s ban on hormone-related beef, the group added, and has pledged to pressure the European Union to accept more genetically modified crops.

CropLife America, the group says, has led lobbying efforts that sought to weaken the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. It “has lobbied to allow pesticides to be tested on children and to allow the continued use of persistent organic pollutants and ozone-depleting chemicals,” according to the center.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) has made clear he supports the president’s decision to bypass lawmakers. “Nominees under President Obama have fared worse than others in recent memory,” he said in a statement. “With the recess appointments of these highly-qualified individuals, President Obama has shown that he is serious about getting the right team in place to create jobs and protect the American workforce.”

Siddiqui as well as Becker’s recess appointments are only good for this session of Congress. Recess appointments, which the Constitution gives the president the power to make, still require confirmation by the Senate by the end of the next session of Congress. The Senate is on Easter recess until April 12.