

March 29, 2010

AGRICULTURE: Controversial trade nominee gets recess appointment

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President Obama gave a recess appointment Saturday to his pick for chief agriculture negotiator in the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative, bypassing opposition from environmentalists concerned about the nominee's ties to a pesticide industry group.

Islam Siddiqui will oversee U.S. farm exports, worth \$115 billion in 2008, as well as farm negotiations at the World Trade Organization's stalled Doha Round of trade talks. Obama also appointed 14 other nominees, including several Treasury positions.

"The United States Senate has the responsibility to approve or disapprove of my nominees," Obama said in a statement. "But if, in the interest of scoring political points, Republicans in the Senate refuse to exercise that responsibility, I must act in the interest of the American people and exercise my authority to fill these positions on an interim basis."

The president has the authority to make recess appointments while the Senate is out of session, sending nominees into office and bypassing confirmation votes. A recess appointment is temporary -- it expires at the end of the Senate's next session or when a nominee is confirmed and permanently appointed to the post, whichever occurs first.

Siddiqui, a senior farm trade official during the Clinton administration, is currently vice president for science and regulatory affairs at CropLife America, a trade group that represents manufacturers of pesticides and other agricultural chemicals.

Siddiqui's work at CropLife and his support for pesticide-heavy practices and genetically modified crops have sparked opposition from environmental and farm-worker groups. More than 113 groups came out against him and have rallied their members to ask the Senate to block the nomination.

"Dr. Siddiqui's confirmation is a step backward," said Tierra Curry, a scientist at the Center for Biological Diversity, one of the groups that opposed the nominee. "His appointment ensures the perpetuation of pesticide- and fossil-fuel-intensive policies, which undermine global food security and imperil public health and wildlife."

Siddiqui has years of experience in international trade and agricultural development. He held a number of agriculture posts in the Clinton administration, including senior trade adviser to the Agriculture Department. In that position, he worked with USTR and represented USDA in trade talks.

Obama's decision to circumvent the Senate on nominations infuriated Republicans.

"It's going to make problems worse," said Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-S.C.) in an appearance yesterday on NBC's "Meet the Press." "At the end of the day, they're really pushing forward here rather than trying to bring this together."

The greatest Republican opposition to Obama's recess appointments focused on a union lawyer appointed to the National Labor Relations Board.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) criticized the labor nominee

in particular as "yet another episode of choosing a partisan path despite bipartisan opposition."

Senior White House adviser David Axelrod defended the appointments on CNN's "State of the Union," saying it was "necessary, unfortunately, for the president to do what he did." Axelrod said Republicans are trying to "slow and block progress on all fronts, whether it's legislation or appointments."

Siddiqui received bipartisan praise from the Senate Finance Committee in November, but his nomination was never put to a vote. The committee's ranking Republican, Sen. Charles Grassley of Iowa, criticized Obama's decision to make the recess appointments, saying members were in process of vetting nominees. Grassley cited specific investigations of two other nominees.

"A lot of presidents have used recess appointments, but it shows a lot of disregard for the Senate's advise-and-consent role to bypass not just the full Senate, but also the committee of jurisdiction that was in the middle of vetting the nominees in its jurisdiction," Grassley said in a statement. "[S]enators have every right to draw attention to an issue of concern by highlighting a nominee."

Presidents of both parties have used recess appointments to bypass the normal confirmation process when a nominee's approval has been delayed. The Senate's Democratic leaders blocked President George W. Bush's recess appointments by having senators periodically preside over an empty chamber in recesses so the body would not be considered out of session.