Obama Christmas Tree Tax on Hold After Uproar

The tax on fresh-cut Christmas trees was supposed to fund a new entity within the U.S. Department of Agriculture called the "Christmas Tree Promotion Board" (CTPB). Supported by some industry lobbyists, the estimated $2 million in revenue would have been used to help improve the image and marketing of American Christmas trees.

According to the notice published in the *Federal Register* earlier this week, the CTPB would be tasked with operating a "program of promotion, research, evaluation, and information designed to strengthen the Christmas tree industry's position in the marketplace."

The board, appointed by the Secretary of Agriculture, would also help to "maintain and expend [sic] existing markets for Christmas trees; and to carry out programs, plans, and projects designed to provide maximum benefits to the Christmas tree industry." Only sellers of 500 trees or more would have been subject to the tax.

But critics immediately ripped into the plan, calling Obama everything from "Grinch" to "Scrooge." Some opponents complained that it was in reality a tax on Christians, while others opposed government promotion of products associated with a Christian holiday. Opponents also lambasted the administration for implementing a Christmas tree tax while multiple wars are ongoing, the deficit is exploding, and the economy is falling apart.

"The economy is barely growing and nine percent of the American people have no jobs. Is a new tax on Christmas trees the best President Obama can do?" wondered David Addington in a blog post for the Heritage Foundation. "And, by the way, the American Christmas tree has a great image that doesn't need any help from the government."

Incredibly, the administration claimed the tax was not really a tax. "I can tell you unequivocally that the Obama Administration is not taxing Christmas trees. What's being talked about here is an industry group deciding to impose fees on itself to fund a promotional campaign," claimed White House spokesman Matt Lehrich, failing to explain the difference between a "tax" and a "fee."

Lehrich also compared the tax and the CTPB it would fund to the dairy industry's "Got Milk?" campaign. However, following the uproar and savage ridicule aimed at the new plan, the administration announced that it was backing down — for now. "USDA is going to delay implementation and revisit this action," Lehrich promised.

But if the White House had not tabled the scheme, legislators were planning to kill it anyway. U.S. Senator Jim DeMint (R-S.C.), for example, blasted the administration's tax as a "ludicrous political misstep — and possibly an unconstitutional one at that."

He also complained that the policy would "take money from hard-working families celebrating

Christmas and give it to clever lobbyists and businessmen running a crony-capitalist subsidy scam." And in a blog post this week, DeMint said he planned to offer an amendment on the Senate floor to kill the plan.

"Hopefully, the Crony Capitalists in the Obama Administration have gone too far this time, and public backlash will force Congress to shut down the Christmas Tree Promotion Board and repeal the single stupidest tax of all time," DeMint concluded. "All I want for Christmas is a free market."

In the House of Representatives, legislators were furious, too. "This new tax is a smack in the face to each and every American who celebrates Christmas, and may be the best example to date of President Obama's obsession with taxing and regulating hard-working American families," said Rep. Steve Scalise (R-La.).

The Christmas tree industry and its lobbyists, facing stiff competition from artificial holiday vegetation, spent years lobbying the government for such a tax. And the National Christmas Tree Association, which strongly supports it, claimed the program "is not expected to have any impact on the final price consumers pay for their Christmas tree."

Tree growers supporting the tax claimed Americans should support the plan because it would help preserve jobs and open land. "In terms of market share we've gone from 100 to 35 percent," complained grower Jim Corliss, chief of the Maine Christmas Tree Association, in an interview with New England Cable News. "That artificial tree is plastic and metal and made offshore."

The administration justified its program by citing the "Commodity Promotion, Research and Information Act of 1996," which has been used to promote certain industries with government backing. But critics say the scheme is not just a bad idea because it interferes in the market — it is unconstitutional, too.

Milk, beef, and other goods are among the products promoted by government propaganda and taxes. But the "Obama Christmas Tree Tax," as critics are calling it, has also helped to raise questions about why the USDA should back any particular industry or product in the first place.

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