

✖ After all the talk over the last two weeks, [here it is](#):

Fresh off a big victory over the GOP establishment on earmarks, conservative GOP senators are opening up a new front in the battle on government spending that could be similar to the earmarks standoff: They are calling on Congress to let billions in ethanol subsidies expire.

Senators Jim DeMint and Tom Coburn, two leading conservative Senators who have pushed the GOP to be serious about its anti-spending rhetoric, told me they are calling on fellow Republicans to urge Congress to allow ethanol subsidies to expire — something that could put other leading GOP Senators in an awkward spot and subject them (in theory) to the wrath of the anti-government-spending Tea Party if they don't go along.

Here is a great test to see whether Republican anti-government and anti-spending rhetoric is any more than that. Ethanol is a lose-lose proposition any way you slice it: it costs a big chunk of money, it's horrible for the environment, and it does nothing but enrich special interests. It's particularly bad on the climate, because the amount of emissions requiring to produce a liter of ethanol is actually more than just using gasoline. Kudos to Senators Coburn and DeMint for pushing this.

Democrats have little reason to crow about this (so to speak): farm state Democrats — most notoriously former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle of (surprise!) South Dakota — long pushed hard for ethanol subsidies. Look for North Dakota's Kent Conrad, who might be the most hypocritical Senator in DC (which is saying a lot), to take up the fight now.

As I've mentioned elsewhere, Republicans are going to start finding that their rhetoric and their contributors don't dovetail very well: for example, they claim to oppose the individual health insurance mandate but vacuumed up \$86.2 million in campaign contributions from health insurers, who love it. And unlike "earmarks," which sound bad on a general basis, ethanol is very clear to agribusiness in farm states.

This is an important opportunity for the environmental community, which needs to be loud on this issue. Let's be clear: it's nowhere close to any kind of *real* strategy for controlling emissions. But it's a start, which is more than anything else has been.