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By JOEL SIEGEL

Uncle Sam Learns to Write

Finally, something both parties in Washington agree on: The need for Uncle Sam to write clearly.

With little fanfare, President Obama this week signed The Plain Writing Act of 2010.

The new law requires that government documents be written in "plain language," defined as "writing that is clear, concise, well-organized, and follows other best practices appropriate to the subject or field and intended audience."

Put simply, you have to be able to understand it.

The measure moved through the bitterly divided Congress with relative ease, although close to three dozen Republican House members voted against it.

Advocates for clear writing hailed its passage.

"A government by the people and for the people should also be understood by the people," said the watchdog Web site, allgov.com.

The movement to bring clarity to complex government documents began decades ago, when a Bureau of Land Management employee named John O'Hayre wrote a book after World War II called "Gobbledygook Has Gotta Go."

In the 1970s, President Richard Nixon ordered that the "Federal Register" be written in "layman's terms."

The Clinton administration even issued monthly "No Gobbledygook Awards" to agencies that ditched the bureaucratese. Vice President Al Gore, who oversaw the effort, called plain language a civil right, and said it promoted trust in government. The effort gave birth to a government Web site that still operates, www.plainlanguage.gov.

But many agencies have been impervious to change, as anyone who has wrestled with a federal income tax form can attest.

Still, there is no guarantee the new law will do the trick. Each federal agency must designate someone to oversee its implementation, and agency heads will have to issue annual reports on

compliance. But there are no penalties for agencies or bureaucrats that continue to churn out indecipherable documents.

The new law will require everything from tax returns to applications for Veterans Administration benefits to be written in simple, easy-to-understand language.

Consider this advisory from the Department of Health and Human Services: "The Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends a half hour or more of moderate physical activity on most days, preferably every day. The activity can include brisk walking, calisthenics, home care, gardening, moderate sports exercise, and dancing."

It already has been changed to this: "Do at least 30 minutes of exercise, like brisk walking, most days of the week."

And a fishing directive that said, "After notification of NMFS, this final rule requires all CA/OR DGN vessel operators to have attended one Skipper Education Workshop after all workshops have been convened by NMFS in September," has been changed to, "Vessel operators must attend a skipper education workshop before commencing fishing."

Ironically, the legislation mandating plain language could have used more plain language. Consider this passage: "The budgetary effects of this Act, for the purpose of complying with the Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act of 2010, shall be determined by reference to the latest statement titled 'Budgetary Effects of PAYGO Legislation' for this Act, submitted for printing in the Congressional Record by the Chairman of the House Budget Committee, provided that such statement has been submitted prior to the vote on passage."

Got it?

Still, the sponsor, Rep. Bruce Braley, D-Iowa, hailed the bill's passage.

<http://abcnews.go.com/WN/obama-signs-law-understand/story?id=11902841>



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