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End ban on Internet gambling

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Nevada learned many years ago that the best way to bring order to the chaos of widespread gambling -- a practice that has flourished, and still does, even where it's illegal -- was to legalize it.

The time has come for Congress to learn the same lesson about online gambling because its attempts to ban the booming business -- said to be worth more than \$15.5 billion a year -- have only brought more chaos.

The ban was adopted quietly in 2006 when Senate Republicans added it to a port security bill. Understanding well that there is no easy way to control what happens on the Internet, the supporters turned credit card companies into the government's enforcers by requiring them to refuse to pay debts run up on the mostly-overseas gambling sites available to Americans.

The bill was, it's now clear, a mess. This week, officials from the Department of the Treasury and the Federal Reserve said that writing regulations to comply with the ban is nearly impossible, given the lack of clear definitions and the inclusion of exemptions for horse racing and state lotteries.

More important, however, the reality of the Internet is that it is not subject to the kinds of regulation that Congress and the federal bureaucracy are used to. And Americans are not likely to accept the government intrusion that would be necessary to make a ban stick.

Yet, it is possible to help Internet gamblers help themselves -- by allowing legitimate, experienced, well-vetted gaming companies to participate.

The rule for any Internet user is to do business only with firms or individuals they're familiar with, whether buying and selling items or choosing roommates. In the gambling world, that would be the companies already running earth-bound casinos, which the law now bans from running virtual casinos.

Ending the chaos requires ending the ban.