

7/14/2008 This Week in Congress

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July 14, 2008

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." I hope you find this newsletter useful.

Encouraging Senate to Pass Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act

This week, I was closely monitoring the Senate's action on the Medicare Improvements for Patients and Providers Act, which included several important fixes for health care providers in Kansas. Importantly, this legislation included a provision that required community pharmacists to be reimbursed in a timely manner and an 18 month delay in Medicare payment reductions for physicians. I supported passage of this legislation in the House in June. It was necessary for the Senate to act so Kansans could continue to have access to their local doctors and pharmacies.

On Tuesday, I spoke on the House floor and highlighted the perspective of a Kansas physician and the impact the Senate's inaction would have on the rural health care delivery system. [Click here to view my speech.](#) I am happy to report the Senate passed this legislation on Wednesday and it has now been sent to the President for his consideration.

Visiting Chapman, President Grants Disaster Assistance for Kansas Counties

I traveled to Chapman on Monday to meet with city and school officials for an update on recovery efforts. I was pleased to hear from Superintendent Tony Frieze about plans to start school on time in Chapman. At City Hall, I met with local officials to discuss the challenges associated with rebuilding homes in the flood plain. I appreciate the information Steve Higgins, Certified Flood Manager from Riley County Planning and Development, provided about what homeowners can expect regarding Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) regulations. Though there is still much work to be done, it is good to see the community progressing with clean-up and plans to rebuild.

After meeting with officials in Chapman, I again contacted the White House and urged the President to declare storm-damaged counties in Kansas a federal disaster area. The President acted on Wednesday and declared 46 Kansas counties, including Dickinson and Riley, a federal disaster area following extensive damage as a result of severe weather that occurred from May 22 through June 16. The declaration provides federal assistance through FEMA for disaster relief and emergency assistance.

The emergency designation is for categories under the Public Assistance program, which authorizes FEMA to provide assistance to state and local governments and certain private nonprofit organizations for emergency work and the repair or replacement of disaster-damaged facilities at a 75 percent federal and 25 percent local and state cost-share. [Click here to read the list of counties eligible for Public Assistance.](#)

Boeing Deserves a Fair Shot at the Air Force Tanker Contract

On Wednesday, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates announced the Air Force would rebid the aerial refueling tanker contract given the findings of the Government Accountability Office (GAO). I recently joined other Members of Congress in asking the Air Force to re-open a fair competition in a manner that corrects the significant errors identified by the GAO's independent review of the award.

Many of us had hoped for an outright award of the contract to Boeing, but the Secretary made the first step in righting the wrongs by deciding to rebid the aerial refueling tanker contract. Boeing should have a fair shot at this contract and Kansas workers and America's military and American taxpayers deserve a fair competition free of the errors that haunted the previous competition. I will work with Air Force and Department of Defense officials during the new competition to see that it is done right.

Court Orders Halt on Critical Feed Use on Conservation Reserve Program Acres

This week, a federal judge issued a 10 day temporary restraining order on Critical Feed Use of Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acres authorized by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The court order was a result of legal action by the National Wildlife Federation. According to the temporary restraining order, all Critical Feed Use activity was to immediately stop once the order was issued.

Critical Feed Use was authorized by USDA on May 27 for certain CRP acreage to be available for hay and forage after the primary nesting season ended for grass-nesting birds. More than 24 million acres of land were made eligible to provide feed and forage to help alleviate the escalating price of feed for livestock producers.

It is unfortunate that this action has taken place especially in this late hour after producers have made stocking decisions. I am working with USDA officials to determine ways to resolve the issue as quickly as possible.

Agriculture Committee Reviews Commodity Futures

This week, the House Agriculture Committee held three hearings with nearly 30 witnesses to gather information on commodity futures markets and review proposals to amend the Commodity Exchange Act. Recently, some have suggested the recent price increase in oil and agricultural commodities demonstrates that changes to how the futures markets operate are necessary. The hearings were useful for Congress to determine whether the futures markets are functioning properly, whether legislation is needed and how to proceed if legislation is needed.

Kansans Express Support for Increased Energy Exploration

As Kansans wrestle with rising energy costs, I continue to advocate for a comprehensive energy policy. We must increase domestic production of oil and natural gas while at the same time support alternative energy, such as solar, wind and biofuels and expand conservation. [Click here](#) to read more about my efforts. With the failure of the President and Congress to aggressively pursue a national energy policy, I welcome the leadership of T. Boone Pickens who last week announced his ideas on how to reduce foreign oil dependence by harnessing domestic energy alternatives.

For the past several weeks, Kansans have participated in a poll on my Web site that asked whether or not the federal ban on oil and gas exploration off our coasts and in Alaska should be ended. Overwhelmingly, the Kansans that voted support increased oil and natural gas exploration.

Visiting Frito-Lay Facility in Topeka

As I made my way back to Washington, D.C., this week, I stopped in Topeka to tour the Frito-Lay facility where Kansans make chips and snacks for distribution across the Midwest. The plant employs hundreds of individuals and is one of the largest employers in Topeka. Before touring the facility, I met with company leaders Omar Vargas, Mark Brinker, Scott Denny, Allen Moore, Jason Hammes, Darrin Hermes and Ken Leicht. Tom Whitaker with the Kansas Motor Carriers Association also joined us for the discussion. [Click here to view a photo from my visit.](#)

Catching Up with Kansans in Sabetha and Frankfort

I spent Friday morning in Sabetha and Frankfort visiting with Kansans and updating them on activity in our nation's capital. While in Sabetha, I stopped by SBS Insurance, Simpson Chiropractic, City Hall, Sabetha Health Mart, the Sabetha Herald, Sabetha Community Hospital, Sabetha Family Pharmacy, Morrill and Janes Bank and the USD 441 office. In Frankfort I visited with folks at City Hall, First National Bank, Elsie Grace's Gift and Bake Shop, the post office and Frankfort Lumber. It was also good to see Mayor Sharon Owen. I enjoyed visiting with a number of folks and sharing with pharmacists and health care professionals the good news of Congress passing legislation this week to prevent cuts in Medicare reimbursements.

In the Office

Don Borgman of Lenexa was in with John Deere to talk about the company's new line of equipment designed to improve nutrient management. Bruce Breckenridge of Lenexa was in with CT Systems to discuss the military's F-35 Lightning II program and the company's facility in Cottonwood Falls.

Several Kansans were in this week to take a tour of the U.S. Capitol building, including Bobby and Debbie Hulse from McPherson and Larry and Linda Youse of Overland Park with their grandson, Carson Schmidt. Also in were Michael, Maria, Alexandra and Seth Cunningham of Junction City; Curt, Glenda, Kyle and Laura Thompson of Hutchinson; Mike, Kim, Cameron, Bryce, Mia and Caydrick Crouch of Emporia; Jeff, Nancy, Jacob and Jared Friesen of Inman; and Barbara, Kathryn and Mary Ellen Wagoner and Sue McQuiliam of Hays.

I also visited with 52 Bennington High School students on Thursday about the inner workings of government. Thanks to Rick Reed of McPherson for arranging the group's trip to our nation's capital. Rick also visited the office for a Capitol tour with group members Dayman and Bayleigh Walker; Shaelyn, Valarie and Dean Martin; and Jo Walker, all of Tescott.

Very truly yours,

Jerry