

1/17/2005 This Week in Congress

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January 17, 2005

Dear Friend,

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

Speaking to the American Farm Bureau

This week, I was invited to speak to two separate national conferences. On Monday, I joined nearly 700 American Farm Bureau Presidents and members, including a number of Kansans, during their annual meeting in Charlotte, North Carolina. I was introduced by Kansas Farm Bureau President, Steve Baccus, and talked to those gathered about the issues facing the agriculture industry. Next year, Congress will be forced to make cuts in our budget in order to decrease the growing national debt. Agriculture spending is one area that has been targeted for cuts. I also discussed the 2007 farm bill and what challenges lie ahead for passing this legislation, given the tight budgetary situation.

Working to Improve Railroad Service

I also joined several of my colleagues on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee for the national conference of the National Railroad Construction and Maintenance Association. We discussed issues important to freight and passenger rail service. It was valuable for me to hear the concerns of the railroads and discuss ways to improve transportation in Kansas and across our country.

In our state, many farmers and businesses depend on railroads to keep them connected to the national transportation network. Kansas has over 2,000 miles of short line railroad track, and ranks second in the nation in the amount of farm products it ships by rail. In 2004, legislation I introduced that will provide a tax credit to encourage investment in short line railroad infrastructure, became law. In 2005, I will continue to look for ways to improve transportation and infrastructure needs that are important to our rural economy.

Hosting First District Legislators in Topeka

This week, the Kansas Legislature began their 2005 session. On Wednesday, I hosted a reception and dinner for the Representatives and Senators from the First Congressional District in Topeka. The bipartisan event allows Representatives and Senators from across the district to come together to discuss the needs and challenges facing our district on a state level and how we can best work together to find solutions to these problems. As a former state Senator, I understand the issues facing our state lawmakers. This year will be especially difficult as they look for ways to fund the state budget and maintain adequate education funding. In addition to the Representatives and Senators, Senate President Steve Morris and Minority Leader Janis Lee were in attendance, as were House Speaker Doug Mays, Majority Leader Clay Aurand and Minority Leader Dennis McKinney.

Also while in Topeka, I met with Secretary of State Ron Thornburg about the recent elections and future changes in voting technology. I also met with the staff of Attorney General Phill Kline to discuss the under-funding of the Kansas Bureau of Investigation in the Governor's budget.

Meeting With Farmers at the Farm Show and Soybean Expo in Topeka

On Wednesday, I joined agriculture producers at the annual Topeka Farm Show and later spoke at the Kansas Soybean Expo. I met with a number of Kansas farmers and ranchers at the farm show, which highlighted the latest developments in new farm and ranch equipment. It was great walking the show and meeting with folks to discuss the issues that are important to them as we embark on a new year.

At noon, I joined the Kansas Soybean Association for their lunch where I provided an update on Soybean Rust and the potential implications on this important Kansas commodity. The soybean industry is an \$18 billion a year crop nationwide, second only to corn, and the potential implications for the market from rust are substantial. The good news for Kansas is that this disease cannot survive the harsh winters of the northern states, so, while it will remain a threat, our state should not see the level of infection that many of the southern states will see.

Nevertheless, this is an important issue for all of us, and I will continue working through my position as Chairman of the Agriculture Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management to see that all necessary steps are in place to assist farmers when outbreaks occur.

Disaster Payment Sign-up Set to Begin In March

Over the past week, I have been in contact with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) about the slow nature of their response to farmers and ranchers who have suffered crop disasters. I have heard from many Kansans on this issue, and the USDA has indicated that producers should be able to sign up for disaster payments by March.

I will continue to urge the USDA in Washington to expedite this process and allow farmers and ranchers who have suffered loss to sign up sooner than March. Once sign up occurs, the USDA believes payments will be made shortly following disaster payment approval.

I am pleased that Congress passed drought assistance, and I appreciate efforts by the USDA to remain accountable to farmers and ranchers. For more information of the specific time and location for the disaster payment sign up, please contact your local Farm Service Agency office.

Joining Rudy Guillian for the Salina Chamber Banquet

On Tuesday, I joined the Salina Area Chamber of Commerce for their annual banquet. The event was attended by a number of business and community leaders and featured special guest Rudolph W. Giuliani, former mayor of New York City. The event was good for the Salina community, and I enjoyed seeing Mayor Giuliani again and hearing his thoughts on America, post-September 11.

Meeting with Manhattan Chamber of Commerce

On Friday, I joined the Manhattan Area Chamber of Commerce for their annual Leaders Summit in Overland Park. About 100 chamber members and state and local representatives joined me for the summit. I spoke about transportation issues and provided a Congressional update. However, one of the major topics of the day was talk about the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) commission. While the BRAC commission has not announced any of their findings, I am confident that, with the efforts of the Kansas Congressional delegation, we will be able to keep Ft. Riley open and hopefully bring additional troops back to the fort. I will continue working to see that this happens.

In the Office

In the office from Kansas for a tour of the U.S. Capitol were Dr. Kendall Krug and his wife, Katrina Hess, along with their children, Russell and Laura, and Katrina's mother, Jody, from Hays.

Very truly yours,

Jerry