

6/28/2004 This Week In Congress

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June 28, 2004

Dear Friend,

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

Grazing Allowed on CRP Acreage

This week, Senator Pat Roberts and I were successful in convincing the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) to release Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage in Kansas for emergency grazing due to serious and long-term drought conditions. The Kansas Farm Service Agency recommended that 21 counties receive this designation, including: Cheyenne, Sherman, Wallace, Greeley, Hamilton, Stanton, Rawlins, Thomas, Logan, Wichita, Kearny, Grant, Decatur, Sheridan, Gove, Scott, Finney, Norton, Graham, Trego and Lane.

For the past several months, I have been working with the state Farm Service Agency offices and USDA to release CRP acreage immediately for emergency grazing. The past five years of drought have placed a tremendous pressure on pastures, forcing some producers to sell livestock or move them out of state. While we have had some recent rains, more is needed. This is at least one step we can take now to help our producers stay in business.

Meeting With Top Medicare Official

Tuesday afternoon, I met with the administrator the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS), Dr. Mark McClellan. Dr. McClellan was recently appointed by President Bush to lead the federal agency responsible for Medicaid and Medicare. The administrator and I discussed ways to improve Medicare reimbursements for hospitals, nursing homes, home-health care and ambulance services in rural areas. I also encouraged McClellan to visit Kansas in the near future to learn more about Kansas hospitals and rural health care. Before the meeting, I contacted health care officials in the First District to make certain that their concerns were raised at the meeting.

Access to affordable to health care is important to all Kansans, and Medicare reimbursements play a big part in determining what health care services are available across our state. As we work toward modernizing the Medicare system, we must make sure that Medicare payments to rural health care providers keep pace with the rising costs of health care.

Secretary Powell Addresses Iraqi Transition

I also met with Secretary of State Colin Powell this week to discuss the U.S. turning the sovereignty of Iraq over to the Iraqis. Secretary Powell spoke about his support for the Iraqis to take control of their country and their future. He said that the vast majority of Iraqis were supportive of U.S. efforts but that we underestimated the 2,000 to 3,000 opposition forces that created security problems throughout the country. Secretary Powell and I also discussed the general safety and security of the Middle East and what role the U.S. can play in helping these countries stop terrorist within their borders.

Working to Balance the Budget, Reduce the National Debt

On Thursday, the House considered several provisions to reform the congressional budget process and place limits on federal spending. We must take steps to balance the federal budget and reduce the national debt. Our children and grandchildren should not be saddled with debt created today. Congress also needs to do more to ensure that taxpayers' money is spent wisely.

The debate created the opportunity to voice concerns about budget reforms and perhaps set the state for a more responsible fiscal policy. My eight years in the Kansas Senate provided many tough choices that had to be made in order to balance the state's needs against its bottom line. The federal government must learn to achieve that balance as well.

Ensuring Troops' Health

This week, I offered an amendment to the funding bill for the Department of Defense to require that troops returning from combat receive post-deployment medical exams. In 1997, I supported legislation that was enacted into law that required the Department of Defense to provide pre- and post-deployment medical examinations for troops deployed overseas. During previous military engagements, post-deployment medical exams were not routinely given, which hindered the ability of doctors to diagnose illnesses that developed months or years after duty.

We have a duty to protect the health of today's active duty soldiers and tomorrow's veterans. At a time when more than a hundred thousand troops are serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Department of Defense should conduct medical exams for soldiers returning home.

Adding VA Clinic to Northwest Kansas

At a hearing this week in the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health, the director for the Denver-area Veterans Affairs (VA) facilities, Dr. Lawrence Biro, testified before the subcommittee about changes in the delivery of VA care in the Denver region. This region also includes six counties in western Kansas. During the hearing, Mr. Biro informed the subcommittee that additional locations for Community-based Outpatient Clinics (CBOC) might be considered in the future. Because many Kansas veterans must still travel great distances to receive health care services, I am working with the VA to push for additional locations for CBOCs. Dr. Biro also has accepted my invitation to visit Goodland this summer to visit with area veterans and to examine the need for future CBOCs in northwest Kansas. Since my arrival in Congress, we have been successful in adding CBOCs in Hays, Ft. Dodge and Salina. The VA is considering a future CBOC in Hutchinson.

Protecting Local Media

In a ruling this week, the 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals in Philadelphia ruled that the Federal Communications Commission cannot allow some companies to expand their ownerships of television and radio stations. This is a victory for our local stations and for maintaining access to our local news, weather and sports. If the networks acquire more of the local television affiliates, programming decisions are less likely to be made by local managers who have personal knowledge of the communities they serve. Placing the power of communication solely in the hands of a narrow group of media giants will undermine freedom of expression. As we work to resolve this issue, I will continue to work to ensure that we maintain our access to local programming.

National Teachers Hall of Fame

On Tuesday, I attended the inaugural meeting of the National Teachers Hall of Fame (NTHF). Each year, the National Board of Trustees meet in Washington, D.C. to address issues associated with NTHF recognition and programming efforts. As a member of the NTHF National Board of Trustees, we work to support teachers and the teaching profession. I am honored to be part of the board and look forward to working with the NTHF to promote quality teaching in America. The National Teachers Hall of Fame is located in Emporia.

In the Office

Sue Boldra of Hays was in the office this week on behalf of the We the People organization to discuss education issues. As Kansas' first place winner of the annual National Peace Essay Contest, Amber Schmitt of Beloit was visiting Washington, D.C. and came to the office. Melissa Fett of Marysville and Lacey Bryant of Kiowa were in on behalf of Lead America and to learn more about the legislative process.

In for a tour of the Capitol this week was Jeanine McKenna of Emporia and Amber Hauptman of Lyons, as were Joe and Gail Robben of Victoria, and their children, Kelsey, Quincy and Steven. Heather Winklepleck of Hays, and her daughters, Alexis and Logan, were in for a tour, as were Carmaine Ternes of Emporia and her children, Stephanie and Brock.

Very truly yours,

Jerry