

12/11/2006 This Week in Congress

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December 11, 2006

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." The House and Senate completed their work early Saturday morning to wrap up the 109th Congress. I have returned home to start my eleventh annual Big First Listening Tour. I hope you find this useful.

Congress Acts to Ensure Rural Areas Continue to Have Doctors

I am pleased that this week the House and Senate passed legislation I introduced to reauthorize the J-1 visa waiver program for two years. The J-1 visa waiver program allows foreign-born, U.S.-educated physicians to work in areas that have a shortage of physicians. This legislation is now before the President and awaits his signature.

The J-1 visa waiver program, which expired on June 1, 2006, is important to making sure Kansans have access to health care. To view my remarks on the floor of the House, [click here](#).

Congress Avoids Physician Payment Cuts and Extends Tax Benefits

Several provisions of a rural health care bill I introduced were included in legislation approved by Congress this week. Medicare's payments to doctors help ensure health care is available to many Kansans. This legislation stopped cuts to physician's Medicare pay rates to keep reimbursements at current levels. Without this action, doctors would have faced a 5.1 percent reduction, which would affect their ability for Medicare beneficiaries to access physicians. In addition, this legislation stabilized reimbursement rates for labs and pathology services in rural areas, making sure that Medicare patients living in rural areas have access to routine lab tests and analysis.

Congress also acted to extend several tax relief provisions set to expire. Importantly, these include deductions for college tuition and for teacher classroom expenses.

Iraq Study Group Releases Recommendations

On Wednesday, the panel known as the Iraq Study Group (ISG) released their assessment of the conflict in Iraq. Their report listed 79 recommendations for changing U.S. strategy. Many Kansans are concerned about the ongoing situation in Iraq, and I appreciate the work of the ISG in providing an independent view and putting forth these recommendations. They rightfully acknowledge that the status quo is unacceptable.

The report calls for the Iraqis to take more responsibility for their country's security so we can bring our U.S. servicemen and women home. A vital component of this effort is the supporting role of U.S. military advisers embedded in Iraqi military and police units. Many of these adviser teams are trained in Kansas by the First Infantry Division at Fort Riley. Their work is critical to an Iraq that can govern itself.

I am hopeful that the Administration and Congress will take a serious look at these proposals. They provide an opportunity for policymakers to come together and seek a new strategy for success.

Beef Trade Must be Fixed Before Trade Agreement with Korea Can Go Forward

On Monday, I sent a letter to United States Trade Representative (USTR) Susan Schwab stating that approval of a free trade agreement between the United States and the Republic of Korea depends on the meaningful resumption of beef trade. My letter was sent as USTR commenced its fifth round of negotiations with the Koreans in an attempt to reach an agreement between our two countries.

Prior to the recent round of trade talks, Korea rejected two shipments of U.S. beef even though the beef met international health standards. One of the shipments, which originated from a Kansas packing plant, was rejected because the nine ton shipment of beef contained a single bone fragment measuring ten millimeters by six millimeters. This treatment of U.S. beef products is unacceptable and is nothing more than non-tariff based protectionism. Korea must cease its protectionist policies against U.S. beef products and allow beef trade to resume in a transparent manner before any trade agreement can move forward.

Beginning My Eleventh Annual Big First Listening Tour

I am beginning my eleventh annual Big First Listening Tour today where I will visit communities in each of the 69 counties of the First District. Today I will be in Elkhart, Johnson, Syracuse, Tribune and Goodland. Tomorrow I will continue in St. Francis, Atwood and Colby. On Wednesday, I will visit Beloit. [Click here](#) to see times and locations, as well as to view my tour schedule through the beginning of January when Congress is scheduled to reconvene.

Honoring the Life and Character of Gerald Tomanek of Hays

This weekend, I paid tribute to Gerald Tomanek of Hays in a memorial service at Fort Hays State University (FHSU). Jerry passed away on November 29. Although he was an accomplished scientist and administrator at FHSU, where he served as president for 11 years, he will be most remembered for the kind way in which he treated others. My family's prayers are with the Tomanek family during this difficult time.

In the Office

Chuck Banks of Topeka was in the office this week with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development office to discuss the office's plans for the upcoming year. Dana Wethington of Topeka was in with the American Red Cross to give me an update on how the organization is transforming its governing practices and to tell me about the services they are providing to military families.

Christy Levings of Olathe and Mark Farr of Nickerson were in representing the Kansas National Education Association to discuss legislative priorities for the upcoming Congress, including reforming the No Child Left Behind Act, increasing the minimum wage, and providing adequate health care for educators and support personnel. Bram Abbott of Liberal was in Washington, D.C., this week to participate in the Congressional Youth Leadership Council's educational program and learn about our country's government. Dick Veach and Catherine Moyer of Ulysses and Paul Cooper, originally of El Dorado, were in the office with Bill McBride, Mark Gailey and Jesse Gailey of Oklahoma to express continued support for the Universal Service Fund, which helps provide telephone and internet service to rural areas at an affordable cost.

Several Kansans stopped by my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol. Cliff and Shari Abbott of Liberal and Beverly Miller of Kiowa stopped by, as did Randall and Diane Hrabec of Plainville and Earl and Loyce Schamberger of Morland. Kim Norwood of Hutchinson also came by for a tour.

Very truly yours,

Jerry