

4/02/2007 This Week in Congress

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April 2, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." The House this week approved a budget plan for fiscal year 2008 and legislation to improve the care of wounded service members by hiring additional caseworkers and better coordinating the transfer of military members into the Veterans Affairs (VA) medical system. During debate on the military health legislation, I spoke about the importance of improving access to care for rural veterans by allowing them to use VA benefits closer to home at community hospitals or local physicians' offices. I successfully supported an amendment to the bill that increases the mileage reimbursement for disabled veterans traveling to VA medical facilities to the same rate that government employees receive - from 11¢ per mile to 48.5¢ per mile. If approved by the Senate, this action will help many veterans, especially rural veterans, afford the trip to the VA doctor.

Asking the Agriculture Committee to Investigate Farm Service Agency Shortfalls

This week, I asked the House Agriculture Committee to examine problems at the Farm Service Agency (FSA), including an ineffective computer system and delays farmers are experiencing when signing up for Direct and Counter-cyclical Programs (DCP). For many months, farmers and ranchers across Kansas have informed me of the antiquated and inept computer system used by FSA. In one FSA office in Kansas, the staff must shut down all of the computers in the office to download a single form onto the system. Not only does this delay producer sign-ups, but it is a waste of staff time and taxpayer dollars.

FSA recently extended the DCP sign-up deadline due to problems with the computer system. The delay in DCP sign-ups is also being caused by extensive FSA paperwork reviews of all farm operations. The reviews were ordered after audit findings showed 11 percent of FSA payments were improper. However, about 91 percent of the improper payments were attributable to paperwork errors. While the government should be held accountable and every effort should be made to correct paperwork errors, forcing unnecessary audits that delay DCP sign-ups and payments to producers who are in compliance is unjustified.

Action by the House Agriculture Committee also comes at an important time as FSA is in the process of consolidating county offices. FSA is telling farmers and ranchers that consolidation will not adversely affect them because they can complete the paperwork online. This has not been the case, however, because the computer system cannot even handle current in-office use.

I am worried that the problems farmers and ranchers are experiencing today are just the beginning and that without significant technology changes, a catastrophic computer collapse will occur. [Click here to read more and hear my audio about this topic.](#)

Agriculture Subcommittee Reviews Farm Bill Commodity Proposals

The House Agriculture Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities and Risk Management held a hearing this week to review proposals to amend the commodity provisions of the 2002 Farm Bill. For rural areas, the farm bill may be the single most important piece of legislation Congress will consider this year. Agriculture across this nation is diverse and while each organization may have a different perspective on how to improve the commodity title of the farm bill, we can all agree that maintaining a strong and vibrant agriculture industry in the United States is essential to the well-being of our nation.

The subcommittee heard testimony from two panels of witnesses representing major commodity groups, including cotton, corn, soybeans, wheat, barley, rice, oilseed, sorghum, and dry pea and lentil producers. It was good to see such a broad representation of American agriculture in one place for the hearing, especially Kansans. Kansans testifying before the subcommittee included John Thaemert of Sylvan Grove, President of the National Association of Wheat Growers; Ken McCauley of Cloud, President of the National Corn Growers Association; Lance Russell of Hays, President of the Kansas Sunflower Commission; and Greg Shelor of Minneola, Past President of the National Sorghum Producers Association.

Western Kansas Community Leaders Visit Washington, D.C.

This week, community leaders from western Kansas traveled to Washington D.C., and received updates on several important congressional issues, such as essential air service, critical access hospitals, immigration and the 2007 Farm Bill.

In from Hays were Assistant City Manager Toby Dougherty, Commissioners Troy Hickman and Barb Wasinger, Larry Berg with Midwest Energy and Mike Michaelis with the Ellis County Coalition. In from Dodge City were Mayor Jim Sherer; Ed Elam, County Manager; Kim Goodnight, County Commission Chair; Jeff Pedersen, City Manager; Ryan Carpenter, Special Projects Manager; Jeanie Zortman, USD 443 board member, and Tony Zortman; Seth Eckelman, USD 443 Director of Public Information; Alan Cunningham, USD 443 Superintendent; Jerry King, incoming Chairman of the Dodge City/Ford County Development Corporation; and Bob Wetmore, President of the Dodge City Area Chamber of Commerce, with Liz and Khannah Wetmore. In from Garden City were Commissioner David Crase, County Commissioner Larry Jones, County Administrator Peter Olson, City Commissioner J.R. Behan, Mayor Gary Fuller and City Manager Robert Halleran.

Attendees from Liberal included City Manager Mark Hall; Debbie Giskie, City Clerk and Airport Manager; Colleen Towns, Economic Development Director; Mayor Ron Warren; City Commissioner Joe Denoyer; Rozelle Webb, Chamber of Commerce Executive, and her husband, Darrell; Dr. Duane Dunn, Chamber President, and his wife, Cindi; and County Commissioner Joyce Hibler. In from Grant County were Scott Nichols, Executive Director of the Grant County Chamber of Commerce; Marlyn Redetzke, Grant County Chamber of Commerce Board Chairman, and his wife, Margaret. In from Barton County were City Administrator Howard Partington, City Council members Ken Roberts and Allene Owen, County

Administrator Richard Boeckman and County Commissioner Rick Scheufler.

Hosting Third Tele-Town Hall Meeting and Visiting with Kansans from D.C.

This week, I conducted my third Tele-Town Hall meeting from Washington, D.C. A Tele-Town Hall meeting is a new way for me to stay in touch with Kansans while I am in Washington, D.C. With the use of this new technology, a single phone call connects me with up to 18,000 people across the district. It is similar to an interactive radio talk show as participants are able to ask me questions. This gives me the opportunity to speak directly with Kansans who, for one reason or another, might not be able to attend my town hall meetings in person. This is not a replacement for the time I spend in Kansas, but rather an additional opportunity to hear the thoughts and concerns of Kansans. It is also a great way to bring people together from all over the state.

Visiting with Students and Teachers in Seneca, Commissioners in Hiawatha

On my way back to Washington, D.C. on Monday, I visited Seneca and Hiawatha. In Seneca, I met with Superintendent Brian Harris and visited the local schools. In early March, a fire destroyed much of the Seneca grade school and Nemaha Valley Junior High building, which housed nearly 300 students. I commend Superintendent Harris, the school faculty and staff, as well as the community members for coming together during this crisis and working to keep classes going for students despite the circumstances.

I also stopped by the courthouse in Hiawatha and dropped in on the county commissioners' meeting to visit with Commissioners Glen Leitch, Warren Ploeger and Steve Roberts and County Clerk Debbie Parker.

New Regulations Cause Delay in Obtaining Passports

Due to new regulations imposed by the U.S. Departments of Homeland Security and State, many Kansans are experiencing delays with the processing of U.S. passport applications. The new regulation requires all U.S. citizens to present a passport to enter the U.S. when arriving by air from any part of the Western Hemisphere. For example, Americans visiting Canada and Mexico and traveling via plane will need valid U.S. passports to re-enter the U.S.

According to the State Department, processing times for passport applications are taking between two and ten weeks depending on the type of service requested. I have contacted the State Department to express my concern with the delays as travel plans are being held up and Kansans are experiencing occasional difficulties with the passport toll-free hotline. If you or your family has plans to travel outside of the country, I encourage you to apply for your passports at least 10 weeks in advance. If you have any questions with the application process or are having problems obtaining information about your pending passport application, please contact one of my district offices. Also for more information about U.S. passports, you may visit the State Department's website at <http://www.state.gov/travelandbusiness/>.

Announcing the Final Stops of my First District Listening Tour

I will conclude my eleventh annual First District Listening Tour next week with visits to Finney, Stevens, Grant and Kearny Counties. On Tuesday, April 10, I will be in Garden City. On Wednesday, April 11, I will visit Moscow, Ulysses and Lakin. [Click here to view times and locations for each community visit.](#)

In the Office

Dee Likes and Matt Teagarden of Topeka, David Cross of Lewis, Tracy Brunner of Ramona, Brian Price of Garden City, Mark Smith of Sharon Springs and Todd Allen of Wichita were in with the Kansas Livestock Association (KLA) to explain current issues facing the cattle industry and to present KLA's legislative priorities for the current year. Dr. Tom Lenz of Louisburg was in to discuss the American Association of Equine Practitioners opposition to H.R. 503, a bill that would ban horse slaughter in the U.S. Dan Senestraro of Johnson and John Wilsa of Kansas City were in with the Dairy Farmers of America to talk about the farm bill and current issues facing the dairy industry. Higher grain prices are having a significant effect on the livestock industry.

Josiah Wiens of Hutchinson was in our nation's capital participating in the People to People educational program. He came by my office to learn more about issues I am working on in Congress. Dr. Paul D'Anieri of Lawrence, Associate Dean of the KU School of Liberal Arts and Sciences, was in to discuss funding for the National Endowment for Humanities. Julie Govert Walter of Manhattan was in representing the North Central-Flint Hills Area Agency on Aging to explain the Agency's role in helping seniors navigate the Medicare Part D program.

Shane Oram of Greeley, Molly Allison-Gallimore of Spring Hill, Hope James of Clay Center, Jeff Wolfe of Emporia, Andrea Everhart of Gypsum and Sarah Maass of Salina were in Washington, D.C. to participate in the National 4-H Conference. The students and their sponsor visited my office to share with me what they are learning about leadership and citizenship. Gary Towson, Carol Pile, Connie Angleton, Bonny Thompson, Bonnie Jordan, Kit Rogers and Amelia Bernhardt of Wichita; Larry Tiffany of Topeka; and Steven Cartwright of Kansas City were in with the National Association of Postal Supervisors to talk about protecting the rights of veterans who are also employees of the U.S. Postal Service.

Colonel Joseph Schwarz of Colby, Commander of the 61st Air Base Wing at Los Angeles Air Force Base in California, came by to introduce himself. I enjoyed meeting Colonel Schwarz and learning more about his distinguished career in the Air Force and his farm in Kansas. Chris Schwensen of Clay Center and Mike Turnbull of Emporia were in with the Kansas Funeral Directors and Embalmers Association to talk about health plans for small businesses and reducing estate taxes. Lacey Ninemire of Lenora was in to tell me about her internship with Presidential Classroom and to visit about current issues before Congress.

Mid-Continent Airport Director Victor White and Charlie Fletcher of Wichita were in to discuss reauthorization of the Federal Aviation Administration and to update me on the progress of Mid-Continent's terminal expansion. Gregg Langston of Manhattan, John Crain of Fort Scott, Chuck Simpson of Kansas City and Sue Peachey of Pratt were in with the Kansas Association of Professional Insurance Agents to talk about crop and flood insurance. Debbie Logsdon and Ruth Mullhatten of Wichita were in with the Professional Engineering Employees in Aerospace to discuss visa limits on foreign engineers.

Eric Guenther of Ottawa was in with the National Association of Credit Specialists to recommend changing current loan provisions during the reauthorization of the farm bill. Kansas Banking Commissioner Tom Thull, Judi Stork and Sonya Allen of Topeka were in representing Kansas State Bank Supervisors to discuss the farm bill. Tom Heathman, Doug Cahoone and Bob Bell of Cottonwood Falls; Donn Teske of Wheaton; Emil Mushrush of Strong City; and John Fairbanks of Onaga were in with National Farmers Union to share their thoughts on the farm bill, disaster relief and other agriculture policies.

Ron Allen and Cliff Mayo of Garden City were in to discuss recent issues the Pawnee Watershed District is facing in construction of HorseThief Reservoir. Ginger Lewman and Marcia Law of Emporia were in representing the Kansas Association for the Gifted, Talented, and Creative to discuss the need to train teachers to identify high ability students. Earl Watkins and Clare Gustin of Hays were in with Sunflower Electric Power Corporation to talk about progress on Holcomb's electric generation plant expansion and biorefinery projects. Gary Shorman of Hays also stopped by to visit. Also in Washington, D.C. this week was the Kansas Federation of Republican Women (KFRW). In with the group were KFRW President Brenda Smith of Salina, KFRW Treasurer Linda Smith of Salina, Alberta Brinkman of Emporia and Virginia Graham of Reading.

Stopping by my Washington, D.C. office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol were Sarah and Gregory Sexton of Abilene and Jarrod Bowser of Mayetta, as well as Kieyata Barksdale of Overland Park.

Very truly yours,

Jerry