

8/06/2007 This Week in Congress

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August 6, 2007

Dear Friend,

Welcome to "This Week in Congress." The House worked into the weekend to complete its business before the August District Work Period. Many issues were addressed including passage of energy legislation and emergency aid to Minnesota to help rebuild the I-35 Bridge in Minneapolis. The House also approved funding for the Department of Defense, which included funding I requested for the Smoky Hill Air National Guard Range near Salina.

Providing Funding for Kansas Agricultural Priorities

I supported House passage of the 2008 Agriculture Appropriations bill this week, which sets the level of federal funding for agriculture programs. Among other things, this bill contains funding for the Agriculture Research Service station in Manhattan, as well as funding for agriculture research projects at Kansas State University. Importation of prescription drugs that meet U.S. health standards is also allowed under this bill. This will help Kansans access more affordable prescription drugs.

The appropriations bill also includes language that blocks closure of Farm Service Agency (FSA) and U.S. Department of

Agriculture Rural Development county and field offices in 2008. Although no language was included to block Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office closures, I expressed my desire to see such a provision added to the bill and was given assurances that the issue would be addressed as the legislation moves into negotiations with the Senate later this year.

During debate on the bill, I also raised the issue of FSA computers continuing to malfunction and slow producer signups. I explained to the House that insufficient funds were reserved for the upcoming year to operate the existing computer system on a daily basis. At the conclusion of my remarks, the Chair of the Subcommittee on Agriculture Appropriations agreed to work with me to address the problem before the legislation becomes law.

Cellulosic Ethanol Plant to be Built in Hugoton

Kansas received good news this week when Abengoa Bioenergy announced that it will build a \$300 million ethanol production plant in Hugoton. As our country focuses more and more on renewable fuels like ethanol, Kansas has the potential to be a major supplier and benefit from the economic activity associated with ethanol production. I worked with the Department of Energy to secure a \$76 million federal grant to help construct this facility in southwest Kansas.

Abengoa's facility will be the first industrial-sized cellulosic ethanol plant in the country and will also feature an 85 million gallon traditional ethanol plant. Cellulosic ethanol is an alternative fuel made from a wide variety of non-starch based plant materials. These materials include perennial grasses and annual crop residues, such as corn stover, sorghum stover and wheat straw.

Eight grain-based ethanol plants are already operating in Kansas and more are on the way.

House Approves Bills for Rural Veterans, Thanks WWII Merchant Mariners

On Monday, the House of Representatives approved several veterans-related bills and created a belated thank you payment to World War II Merchant Mariners, who served and sacrificed much for our country. I supported these bills during consideration in the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and I was pleased to see the full House take action.

Notably for rural veterans, House-passed legislation provides grants to organizations that provide transportation options for veterans in rural areas to travel to VA medical facilities. It also enhances readjustment counseling and mental health services for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom veterans by requiring the VA to contract with private and non-profit providers in areas not served by the VA. Since our nation's founding, rural communities have always responded when our nation calls. Today, more than 40 percent of our military recruits come from rural areas. As these rural soldiers return home from war, our nation must care for them.

Taking Action to Fix the Social Security Disability Backlog

A report released this week by the American Association of People with Disabilities showed that Kansas has the greatest backlog of citizens waiting to receive a decision from the Social Security Administration (SSA) about the status of their disability benefits. This news is unacceptable. Kansans deserve to have decisions in a timely manner.

I joined my Kansas colleagues in the House this week in requesting a meeting with the SSA Commissioner, Michael Astrue, to find out what the SSA is doing to correct this problem and find out how Congress can help.

Working to Ensure Kansans in Disaster-Struck Areas have Access to Housing

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recently suspended the sale and use of travel trailers and mobile homes for emergency housing while the agency investigates formaldehyde concerns raised by some occupants. I contacted FEMA this week to emphasize the importance of the housing program to disaster-struck areas such as Greensburg. Later in the week, the mobile home program was reactivated, allowing Greensburg residents and others across the state to utilize these mobile homes for temporary housing. Families remaining in travel trailers in Greensburg are now being transferred to safe mobile homes.

I also visited with Governor Kathleen Sebelius this week about the issue. Though the needs of residents in Greensburg are being met, there are concerns about adequate housing for flood victims in southeast Kansas and I will continue to work on this issue to make sure Kansans' housing needs are met.

Progress Made in Bringing Peace to Darfur

After meeting with United Nations (UN) officials in New York City last week, the UN Security Council authorized a 26,000 member peacekeeping mission to the Darfur region of Sudan. While the decision to send peacekeepers to Darfur is long overdue, I am pleased the UN is taking action to establish order and protect innocent people.

Also this week, the House passed a bill I sponsored that requires companies to disclose the nature of its business with Sudan. With this information, American investors could decide to sell their stock in these companies in protest to the government of Sudan's acquiescence of the killing in Darfur.

Supporting Lobbying and Ethics Reform

This week, I supported final House passage of important lobbying and ethics reforms to restore public trust in elected officials. Members of Congress must be held to high ethical standard and taxpayers deserve an open and accountable government. The bill included provisions of legislation I sponsored to deny federal pension benefits to any Member of Congress convicted of a felony such as bribery or fraud. It also included changes to lobbying and ethics rules that require lobbyists to file quarterly reports and for those reports to be searchable in an electronic database. This bill now awaits the President's signature.

Discussing the Wounded Warriors Report with Former Kansas Senator Bob Dole

On Friday, I spoke to former Kansas Senator Bob Dole about ways to improve our nation's care of wounded service members and veterans. Following revelations of poor care at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in March, President Bush named Senator Dole co-chair of the Commission on Care for America's Returning Wounded Warriors to conduct a comprehensive review of military and veterans care. The Senator and I discussed the Commission's report, released last week, which includes 35 recommendations for improving care. Congress should take these recommendations seriously. I will work through my position on the Veterans Affairs Committee to see that improvements are made so our wounded warriors receive the care they deserve.

House Reauthorizes Children's Health Insurance Program

The House passed a measure this week that reauthorized the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP) for another 10 years. SCHIP provides health care to low-income children whose families make too much money to qualify for Medicaid. While I support SCHIP reauthorization, this legislation is troublesome because it balloons the size of the program and pays for the increase by raising taxes and cutting important health care programs related to home health, medical equipment and skilled care. The Senate has a more acceptable version of the bill. I will be watching the House and Senate negotiations to make sure America's children receive appropriate health care coverage.

Investigating the Safety of the J-1 Visa Program

This week, I again met with Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and Educational Commission for Foreign Medical Graduate officials to discuss the J-1 Visa program. Since the arrest of terror suspects in Great Britain just over a month ago were found to be medically trained, safety concerns have been raised about this important program to Kansas. The J-1 Visa program allows international medical graduates to stay in the U.S. in exchange for three years of practicing medicine in areas experiencing a shortage of doctors.

Advocating for Quality Flight Service to Kansas City

Midwest Airlines announced this week that its board of directors has agreed to look into a possible merger with AirTran Holdings Inc. or other interested parties. I visited with the Midwest Airlines President and CEO Tim Huxman about this

development on Friday. I also had a discussion with Pete Levi, President of the Kansas City Area Chamber of Commerce. As a Member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Aviation, I am committed to making sure Kansans have numerous and quality options to meet their air service needs.

Discussing Transportation Security with Federal Officials

I attended a classified briefing this week with officials from the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) concerning security risks in transportation in the U.S. TSA Administrator Kip Hawley discussed new technology becoming available to better protect travelers in our country. The federal government has no higher priority than to protect its citizens. I appreciated the opportunity to learn about the continued work of TSA.

In the Office

Jan and Reg Konrade and Father Henry Baxa of Abilene and Father Wesley Schawe of Great Bend were in representing the Diocesan Pro-Life Directors to talk about adult and cord blood stem cell research and other pro-life issues. Barry and Thomas Coopridger of Hutchinson were in to visit before going on a Capitol tour. United States Attorney for the District of Kansas Eric Melgren of Wichita was also in to visit.

Many Kansans stopped by my Washington, D.C., office this week for a tour of the United States Capitol, including Jonathan and Jenny Stillwell of Beloit, Don and Myrna Murphy of Wichita, and Rylee Wilson of Shawnee. In from Hutchinson were Todd, Javon, Brandon, Brett and Blake Brunner and Tim, Jeannie, Patrick, Courtney, Dylan and Shanese Miller.

Linda Bowersox, a former classmate of mine now living in Topeka, was in with her husband Dan. Also in were Janel Bowersox of Manhattan; Dana, Matthew and Christopher Abraham of Overland Park; and Matt, Michelle, Kobe and Gracie Shroyer of Topeka. Tim, Brenda, Bryn and Alex Benoit of Damar came by, as did Ken, Annette and Benjamin Boyer of South Hutchinson. In from Salina were Steve and Lynn Ryan and Bill, Laurel, Megan, Christopher, Brooke, Robbie and Nathan Garlow.

Very truly yours,

Jerry