

farmers, ranchers, and agriculture stakeholders from all over the country, and they have been sounding the alarm of the dire circumstances they face in producing a safe, affordable, and abundant supply of food. Farmers from my home State of Arkansas shared with the committee last week about the difficult conversations they are forced to have right now about continuing their multigenerational farms and risking their families' futures in the industry. Unfortunately, this is a conversation many more farm families across the country will have if we do not act quickly.

Congress must deliver an updated 5-year farm bill that modernizes the safety net in order to minimize the liabilities farm families take on when they plant their crops. Food security is national security. Our country is blessed to have grocery stores stocked with food to put on our tables. This is the result of the hard work of our farmers and ranchers. These producers need the tools to be successful and continue to grow the food, fiber, and fuel our Nation depends on.

I know Brooke Rollins shares my commitment to enhancing policies that help farm families and rural communities thrive. Given her executive leadership, she is well prepared to hit the ground running when she walks through the doors of the USDA as Secretary and to deliver this certainty and predictability our producers need. I look forward to working with her and strengthening rural America for the men, women, and families who call it home.

I also want to thank everyone on both sides of the aisle for making it such that we can do this in such an expeditious way. It took a lot of cooperation. I think it just shows how important our farmers are to both Democrats and Republicans. It is one of the few areas in which it is not a partisan issue. It is all about helping the men and women who work so, so very hard to provide the food we eat.

With that, I yield the floor.

RECOGNITION OF THE MAJORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

NOMINATION OF BROOKE ROLLINS

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, anybody who knows me well knows that I say this a lot, and that is that agriculture is the lifeblood of South Dakota and the lifeblood of our country, and farmers and ranchers are hard at work every single day to feed America and the world. But what I hear lately from farmers and ranchers is not good.

Agriculture producers across the country have faced strong headwinds in recent years—higher input costs, high interest rates, lower commodity prices—all leading to declining farm income year after year. Natural disasters have struck many of our farm regions, and the bird flu continues to ravage agriculture across the country.

Of course, in the last few years, the Biden administration was hardly much

help. It imposed burdensome regulations like WOTUS, or waters of the United States, that threatened to devastate the farm sector. The administration put expanding market access on the back burner while our agricultural trade deficit grew to record levels, and their profligate spending led to inflation that hit farmers and ranchers especially hard in the form of higher input costs.

Meanwhile, Democrats here in Congress failed to prioritize a modernized farm bill to support agriculture through these challenges, and we are now more than a year past due for an updated farm bill. America's farmers and ranchers deserve better—much better.

I expect things will be different under President Trump, and I know that farmers and ranchers will have a friend in Brooke Rollins, the President's choice for Secretary of Agriculture.

Ms. Rollins grew up in the small, agricultural town of Glen Rose, TX. She spent summers working for her family on their farm in Minnesota, helping with their corn, potato, and soybean crops. She was a 4-H'er, an FFA State officer, and a barrel racer, and her four kids are keeping up her family's way of life by showing cattle in Texas.

After studying agriculture development at Texas A&M, Ms. Rollins went to work for then-Governor Rick Perry, where she worked on agriculture policy. She then continued her ag work by building up a Texas think tank, empowering the voices of farmers, ranchers, and rural communities. Then she served in President Trump's first administration—first leading the Office of American Innovation and then on the Domestic Policy Council.

Brooke Rollins is a policy wonk with a farmer's heart. She understands the needs of agriculture producers, and she knows how to deliver results. She promises to get right to work after she is confirmed on four key priorities: first, getting disaster and economic aid out the door and into the hands of farmers; second, getting the bird flu and other animal disease outbreaks under control; third, getting the farm bill done; and finally, revitalizing the U.S. Department of Agriculture to focus on its core mission and put America and American agriculture first. I am looking forward to working with Ms. Rollins on these key priorities.

Under this Republican majority, delivering a modernized farm bill is a priority, and I am glad that Ms. Rollins has pledged to work with Congress on one of the top farm bill needs, which is strengthening the farm safety net—essential to keeping existing operations going—and encouraging the next generation of producers to get started.

I was also pleased to hear Ms. Rollins acknowledge the need to improve the management of national forests. The Black Hills National Forest, among others across the country, has seen its timber industry decimated by bad man-

agement policies. So I look forward to working with the USDA, under Secretary Rollins, to provide relief from the dire situation in western South Dakota.

I am encouraged as well that she will prioritize getting disaster and economic assistance out the door. Last year, many parts of the country suffered from natural disasters, including South Dakota. As I said, farmers and ranchers have suffered lower commodity prices and declining incomes. In December, Congress passed \$31 billion in agricultural disaster and economic assistance, and we need to get that money into the hands of farmers and ranchers working to rebuild.

Brooke Rollins understands the mission of the USDA. She understands the day-to-day needs of America's farmers, and she has the expertise to deliver results. I trust that she will put America's farmers and ranchers first as Secretary of Agriculture, and I look forward to working with her in this role.

(The remarks of Mr. THUNE pertaining to the introduction of S. 587 are printed in today's RECORD under "Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.")

Mr. THUNE. I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that I be permitted to speak for up to 15 minutes, Senator CRAPO for up to 5 minutes, and Senator SCHUMER for 2 minutes prior to the scheduled votes.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

NOMINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, late into the night, Senators spoke on the Senate floor about why Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., is the least qualified nominee to ever be tapped as America's chief health officer.

On issue after issue, Mr. Kennedy has demonstrated a profound lack of knowledge, at best, and deeply dangerous views, at worst.

Mr. Kennedy has refused to tell Americans how we would manage healthcare issues that they are deeply worried about: vaccine safety, women's reproductive health, drug pricing, and affordable healthcare, to name a few. This leaves millions of Americans alarmed about the future of health and science in America.

Last week, two Oregon medical students approached me to talk about Mr. Kennedy's nomination. These medical students told me they were less concerned about the damage Mr. Kennedy would do as HHS Secretary in the weeks and months to come. These medical students are not only worried

about the prospect of losing cures, treatments, and medical breakthroughs if Mr. Kennedy is confirmed. These medical students from Oregon told me that his unwillingness to take science and medical data seriously is going to harm science for decades to come.

So I ask my colleagues to think about those medical students' words. Is that a legacy you want to leave behind as a result of supporting Mr. Kennedy?

Senate Democrats have been making this exact case. In his hearing before the Finance Committee, I asked Mr. Kennedy to square his anti-vaccine views with more recent statements designed to appease a number of our Senators who are quite nervous about his nomination.

In his testimony, he used the fact that his own children were vaccinated to prove he was not anti-vaccine. But the record shows that just a few years ago, he said he would "do anything" and "pay anything" to go back in time in order to prevent them from getting those vaccines.

Elsewhere in his testimony, Mr. Kennedy stated he was not anti-vaccine but, rather, "pro-safety." But about 18 months ago, he said on a podcast:

No vaccine is safe and effective.

In other words, in the Senate Finance Committee, we brought the evidence; we brought the receipts, and Mr. Kennedy said nothing to actually disavow his prior statements. He stuck by the timeworn tactics of a conspiracy theorist: Always ask for more evidence, and never accept the evidence that is placed in front of you.

Even some of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle are now deeply disturbed by Mr. Kennedy's refusal to entertain evidence that would require him to change his mind on vaccine safety. Nevertheless, it sure looks like my Republican colleagues have bowed to pressure from Donald Trump and are poised to hand Mr. Kennedy the platform he has been seeking for two decades to push fringe views.

Before the Senate votes, I would like to take a moment to talk a little bit about the fights ahead on healthcare.

Republicans in the House are already pressing ahead this morning with their plan to kick millions of Americans off of their health insurance in order to fund more tax cuts for those who are very wealthy. And as HHS Secretary, Mr. Kennedy is going to be a key player in this effort.

While Senators were on the floor speaking yesterday, the Senate Budget Committee debated a budget resolution that unlocks the legislative tools Republicans need to make good on their go-it-alone plan. At the same time, the House Budget Committee released its own budget resolution that will be debated today.

What is clear in both of these blueprints, in their game plan, is that Medicaid cuts are at the top of the list.

Eighty-one million Americans rely on healthcare coverage under Medicaid

and the CHIP program for kids. Those people are folks with disabilities, low-income families, seniors, and, of course, children.

The damage and destruction to American families if Republicans go through with their plans to gut Medicaid cannot be overstated.

Take nursing homes, for example. Two out of three nursing home residents are currently being covered for their healthcare by Medicaid.

Imagine you visit your mom in her nursing home in the months after the Republican bill makes steep cuts to Medicaid. Your mom complains there are fewer and fewer staff. She had to wait more than an hour after calling for help to use the bathroom on several occasions.

The next time you visit, she tells you some of the new staff don't have time for her. You learn that the facility no longer has the resources to conduct background checks and that they are desperate for workers.

A few weeks later, the facility manager pulls you aside to deliver some bad news. Her nursing home can no longer accept patients with Medicaid after steep Federal cuts to the program. Unless you can find another facility that accepts Medicaid, you have got to pay the high monthly costs out of your own pocket.

Suddenly, and with no warning, you have got impossible options. Either you scramble to find the money to cover a new facility that costs thousands of dollars a month, or you bring your mom home with you.

So between holding down a full-time job and raising young kids, suddenly, you have to deal with making sure your mom gets full-time care, and that requires nursing assistance around the clock.

Unfortunately, this case I described is something you see in every nook and cranny of America. I know that from my days as codirector of the Gray Panthers. And I know that many of your friends and neighbors with aging parents and grandparents in nursing homes are facing the catastrophe that I have just described.

Now, Republicans are going to do somersaults to disguise their cuts to Medicaid, and they are going to describe it in healthcare lingo that they think plays well with people.

For Republicans, every single child, senior, or family struggling to pay the bills that gets denied coverage is a win. That brings us to Mr. Kennedy.

During his confirmation hearing on everything from abortion to vaccines to Medicare and Medicaid, Mr. Kennedy was given ample opportunity to go on the record about how he would improve these programs, bring down costs, save taxpayers money, and improve care. Instead, he showed a complete lack of understanding of the basics of Medicaid and how it functions.

I personally believe it shouldn't be too much to ask for the future CEO of Medicaid to understand how important

it is to provide affordable coverage for millions of families.

Republicans, with Donald Trump at the helm, are steering our country toward a healthcare cliff. Their ultimate objective is to take away Medicaid from as many people as they can.

Colleagues, so much for making America healthy again.

What the American people need is a leader who will be the voice of reason in the room as Trump and his assistants in Congress start slicing and cutting.

Our country needs a leader at Health and Human Services who is actually going to work to improve care and lower costs, defend the reproductive freedom of families, and listen, in particular, to facts and science.

The American people have no reason to believe, based on the record, the evidence that the Senate Finance Committee has accumulated—to believe that Mr. Kennedy will be that leader.

There is no question the healthcare system in America needs reforms. It has fallen short, and Democrats want to work in a bipartisan way on those issues.

We are disillusioned by a system that puts profits over patients in too many circumstances. Nobody on this side of the aisle is arguing for the status quo.

But the solution, colleagues—and I am closing with this—does not lie in Donald Trump's "concept of a plan" to make our country less healthy, less safe, and less successful.

When kids are kicked off their Medicaid coverage and forced to go without basic medical care and grow up with chronic illnesses that leave them in a lifetime of pain and suffering, Republicans are going to regret any vote they give to Robert Kennedy.

When seniors are told they have to vacate their nursing homes because it no longer accepts Medicaid, Republicans again will regret a vote for Robert Kennedy.

When families are struggling to pay the bills and they are landed with a mountain of medical debt because their kid got sick and they were kicked off their insurance, finally, Republicans will regret any vote they give to Robert Kennedy.

Mr. Kennedy will, no doubt, be right alongside Republicans, a willing participant in this future for healthcare that I have described today that is really stepping back from progress that has been made.

I urge a "no" vote.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

MR. CRAPO. Mr. President, I rise today in support of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.'s nomination to be Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and to urge my colleagues to vote in favor of his confirmation.

Contrary to the attacks that have constantly been made on him, he has made it very clear that he will support safe vaccinations and just wants to see

that the research on them is done and done well.

When his nomination for the role of Secretary at HHS was announced, Mr. Kennedy stated:

We have a generational opportunity to bring together the greatest minds in science, medicine, industry, and government to put an end to the chronic disease epidemic facing Americans.

I agree with him. We have got to get into the business of making America healthy again.

Mr. Kennedy's dedication to this commitment has been apparent throughout the nomination process. He will bring a fresh perspective to healthcare, prioritizing consumer choice, information transparency, and early interventions to strengthen the well-being of all Americans.

He has been responsive to a wide variety of questions from Members on both sides of the aisle, appearing before two committees and answering hundreds of questions for the record, not to mention going through the extensive vetting process of the Finance Committee, which I chair, which is the most extensive vetting process that any candidate for a position in this administration goes through in the Senate.

While some of my colleagues continue to question his financial agreements, Mr. Kennedy met and then exceeded the requirements set forth by the Office of Government Ethics. Mr. Kennedy has participated in one of the most extensive processes, as I have said, that our Senate puts a nominee through and has succeeded in meeting those standards, and I encourage my colleagues to support his nomination.

HEALTHCARE FUNDING

Mr. President, now, before I close, I want to respond briefly to the comments that we have heard today here on the floor and all day yesterday in a long, long Budget Committee hearing to set up the first reconciliation legislation to come before the Congress.

It was said today that Republicans are going to take Medicaid away from children; they are going to take healthcare away from seniors. It was said yesterday that we were going to go after pretty much old people, young people, middle-aged people, and every other kind of people because we are going to destroy the support base that they have here in the Federal system.

The fact is, this is the politics of fear, the politics of claiming things that are going to happen which are not going to happen.

The reality is that yesterday's Budget Committee meeting was not on healthcare. There was nothing done in the meeting yesterday that would have done any of the things that you have heard on the floor today. What we did do yesterday was to set up a process so we can provide some significant extra spending authority to our government to close the border and deport the violent criminals who have come into our country in the millions in the last few

years. We had another provision in it to give significant new resources to our national defense so that we can build back our Department of Defense and the ability of our armed services members to have the technology and the equipment and be capable of responding to threats to our Nation.

And, finally, we restarted and charged up our use and engagement in producing America's energy in America so that we can get back into the business of being independent and not relying on other nations for our energy policy.

Those are the three things that we focused on in the committee yesterday. And, by the way, each one of those was a little bit costly, and every one of those was offset so that there was no increase in Federal spending.

Mr. President, I think we need to argue over facts when we get into these debates. We are going to have a tremendous number of debates. And, yes, we will debate on healthcare at some point, but yesterday and what we did yesterday was focused on the border, on national defense, and on reboosting our energy production in America.

I encourage a strong "yes" vote for Robert F. Kennedy to be the next Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent for 1 minute for an opportunity to respond to my colleague from Idaho.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I would only say to my friend from Idaho that he says this is not going to happen, that people are going to be safe and seniors on Medicaid and the like will be safe—I would just say to my colleague, it starts today—today—in the other body of Congress, I would say to my colleague. The process of setting in motion these cuts to essential healthcare services begins today. We can read about it in the publications about the congressional schedule.

I look forward to working with my colleague when we can find common ground, but on this point that it is not going to happen and everybody is going to be safe, the efforts to cut these vital programs, including Medicaid, begins this morning in the other body.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Idaho.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have 30 seconds to just respond.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CRAPO. Mr. President, I would simply say that we hear this every time we look at trying to address the spending excesses in our government.

And I will just say to my colleague and to everyone: We are not going to take healthcare away from children. We are not going to take healthcare

away from adults, from seniors, or from middle-aged people. We are not going to attack the benefits that people get under Medicare.

And, frankly, we will reform some of the spending, yes, but we will not do all of the terrible things that are being spun up to try to attack this effort to control the excessive spending in our government.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Democratic leader.

NOMINATION OF ROBERT F. KENNEDY, JR.

Mr. SCHUMER. Mr. President, the fact that we are here right now—that we are even here right now—voting on this wildly unqualified conspiracy theorist to trust with one of the most life-or-death jobs, HHS Secretary, charged with protecting the health of every single American should be an affront to every Senator and the millions of Americans that will be impacted by this horrific nomination.

My colleagues on the other side of the aisle, I implore you, think one more time, one last time, about this vote. My colleagues on the Republican side, you know the consequences of what you are doing. My colleagues on the Republican side, you know how dangerous this is. My colleagues on the other side, you know you are not putting your constituents, their health, their families first when you vote yes.

To quote my colleague the junior Senator from Texas just a few years ago, he said:

We need an expert, we need a scientist, we need someone who knows something about healthcare leading the Health and Human Services Department.

Well, which is Robert Kennedy? An expert? A scientist?

Or what about the senior Senator from Louisiana, the chair of the HELP Committee and a well-respected medical professional himself? A few years ago, here is what he said:

Previous HHS Secretaries have had a pharmaceutical industry background, been a State health commissioner, run health systems, have been governors—somebody who has had a background in actually administering the programs that HHS administers.

I ask my colleagues: Which of these qualifications does RFK possess?

You know the answer: None of them.

The question in front of this body today—the question in front of this body—is not simply to confirm RFK to run the Nation's Health Department. The question before us is very simple: Which is more important to you—the health and well-being of your constituents or blindly obeying orders, knowing full well the dangerous impacts your vote will enable?

I plead with you one more time: Rethink this issue. This is dangerous. This is wrong—very wrong.

I yield the floor.

VOTE ON KENNEDY NOMINATION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, all postcloture time has expired.

The question is, Will the Senate advise and consent to the Kennedy nomination?