

HOME HEATING OIL PRICES MUST BE BROUGHT DOWN

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from New York (Mr. CROWLEY) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. CROWLEY. Mr. Speaker, the issue I want to talk about is the issue of the skyrocketing cost of home heating oil in the Northeast, particularly in New York and New England. It is an extremely, extremely serious problem.

The problem was brought to my attention, quite frankly, by the good work and the efforts of our U.S. Senator from New York who was seen nightly on the television programs, CHUCK SCHUMER, talking about the imminent problem that we are now faced with.

I, along with the gentleman from New York (Mr. ACKERMAN) and the gentlewoman from New York (Mrs. LOWEY), introduced legislation to provide the Secretary of Energy with the authority to draw down the Nation's reserve oil supply in the Strategic Oil Reserve. That will go a long way to reducing the cost of home heating oil immediately, as was demonstrated back during the Iraqi conflict in 1991 when then President Bush opened the Strategic Petroleum Reserve and, overnight, the cost of home heating oil dropped by \$10 a barrel, affording millions of people in this country more home heating oil.

President Clinton has indicated that he will not draw down the supplies; but I, along with many of my colleagues, will press him in this matter. Hence, I have joined with a number of my colleagues in both political parties asking him to reconsider his refusal to use these reserves.

We have a massive oil supply problem, and I believe the best way to address this issue and see a sharp decline in the cost of oil is to open these reserves and bring this oil into the market.

Last week Secretary of Energy Bill Richardson addressed a number of Congressmen and women from the Northeast, and, although he too expressed reluctance to open up these reserves, by listening to us and the stories of our constituents, such as Dorothy Alteri of Dudley Avenue, who saw her energy bill skyrocket this year, I hope we can sway him to reconsider.

Mr. Speaker, I have before me here two bills to two constituents. Phillip Occhino from the Bronx, his bill for the last month was \$414. I dare say it has more than doubled this past month.

I have another one here from Thomas Donohue from Woodside, Queens. His, too, his home heating bill for last month was \$410.39, well above what they paid in the past for the same home heating oil.

I fear that after last year's warm winter and the resulting profit losses of the oil refineries, that they are trying to recoup past deficits by overcharging this year. To reinforce this contention, I have noticed that the price of oil, die-

sel fuel and fuels in general, are much higher in the New York and New England region than they are in other parts of the country.

For example, I got a letter from Vincent Fullone, the president of Fullone Trucking, who told me the national average price for diesel fuel on February 9, 2000, was \$1.47 a gallon. On that very same day in New York, a gallon of diesel fuel cost \$2.29 a gallon. It just is not fair that diesel fuel trucks in our region are paying more for their diesel than other regions of this country.

It is safe to be said for the home heating oil industry and our gasoline prices as well that there is a serious price differential from what we here in New York pay versus what other people in different States pay. For that reason I am working with my colleagues and demanding an investigation by Attorney General Janet Reno and the Department of Justice into any price fixing that may have been orchestrated by the fuel oil industry.

I am also pleased that the House has held a hearing on OPEC, the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. I am glad that my committee, the Committee on International Relations, has also held a hearing investigating OPEC's price-fixing schemes.

OPEC are the same people that brought us the 1977-1979 oil shortages, as well as 1973; and I fear they are at it again, cutting supply to raise their profit margin at the expense of Americans. The U.S. must stop this practice of OPEC.

For lower-income seniors I am also a supporter of the President's releasing more of the Nation's reserve funds in the LIHEAP program. The Low Income Energy Assistance Program is a Federal program that provides assistance to low-income Americans to pay for fuel and utility costs. Recently, the President released \$175 million of LIHEAP surplus funds, with \$36.6 million going to New York.

Although I was pleased the President has begun releasing the reserve funds in this account, I was troubled to see the flawed formula used by the administration. Instead of targeting the States with the greatest need, like New York and the New England States, virtually every State in the U.S. and U.S. territories benefited from this Federal program for home heating assistance, including the Virgin Islands, Florida, Arizona and Texas. I am urging the President to release more money from this reserve account, but asking him to do it in a way targeting those people hurting the most, like the people in New York.

In New York City there are too many seniors who live only on Social Security checks. They cannot afford any increase in the cost of home heating oil. This LIHEAP reserve fund is there to help offset the high cost of home heating fuel for these lower-income individuals. These funds should be used to aid those with the most need.

I am also one of the principal supporters of legislation sponsored by my

friend, the gentleman from Vermont (Mr. SANDERS), legislation that would create a home heating oil reserve that the President could draw down upon when oil fuel prices skyrocket, like they have this winter. This legislation is based on a 1998 Department of Energy study that outlined that a home heating oil reserve would be an effective method of stabilizing home heating oil prices in the future.

Some of this oil, 2 million barrels, would be stored in containers in New York Harbor. I understand the Secretary of Energy has recently expressed some interest in this idea, and I am grateful for that. Although the solutions I speak of will not resolve any of the difficulties this winter, it would address these problems in the upcoming years. I want to let you know that we are working tirelessly on this issue.

I received a petition just yesterday from a number of senior citizens in the Bronx in my district complaining about their high cost of home heating oil. The reality is we may not be at war with the Middle East nations, but we are in economic war with OPEC. The people to be the victims in this war will be the senior citizens, the people least able to afford to pay for home heating oil.

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ON THE KEEP THE PROMISES ACT, H.R. 3573

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentleman from Georgia (Mr. NORWOOD) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Mr. NORWOOD. Mr. Speaker, I know you know that this House is very attuned to the ongoing debate over reigning in the abuses of the managed care industry in general. But today I would like to bring attention to a more specific injustice, one that is not addressed by the managed care reform legislation under consideration by the House-Senate conferees committee.

Mr. Speaker, before this session is out, we need to pass legislation that will address the worst HMO in the country, our military health care system. As is the case with all managed care abuses, our military system is failing to deliver the benefits for which its beneficiaries have paid.

These patients were promised fully funded health care for life in exchange for 20 years of military service. That is a defined benefit, just like those benefits defined in civilian-managed care plans. You pay the premium, and you should receive the benefit.

Our military retirees paid for their benefit with 2 decades of service. In return, they were guaranteed that they would not have to pay out of pocket for health care by having access to military health care facilities or supplemental insurance, CHAMPUS, that would pay the bills at civilian hospitals if military facilities were not available.

That is the coverage that Sergeant First Class John Nation and his wife,

Barbara, of Southport, North Carolina, thought they had after John served 21 years in the Army. That service included two tours in Vietnam with the artillery. Sergeant Nation was certified by the Veterans Administration as suffering cancer from exposure to Agent Orange during that war.

Here is the benefit that Sergeant Nation received: because there was not an Army or VA hospital within 2½ hours of their home, they had to seek civilian treatment. Because Barbara had private health insurance through her job at Carolina Power & Light, CHAMPUS refused to accept primary responsibility for John's treatment. When CHAMPUS received the portion of John's bills not covered by the private insurance, they still refused to pay for the vast majority of the care. They told Barbara, his wife, that the charges exceeded their rate schedule, so they were not obligated to pay anything. On bills that were within their rate schedule, CHAMPUS rejected the majority of chemotherapy, radiation, and hospital charges on technical grounds. John passed away. Barbara was forced to surrender her entire retirement savings to pay the bills rejected by CHAMPUS.

Now, I ask every Member of this House, is this fully funded health care for life as promised? Does the treatment that Sergeant First Class John Nation received from the U.S. Government qualify as having provided the benefits that he and his family were promised?

John Nation honored his part of the contract. We failed to honor ours. It is time we made good on our promises to the Nation's military retirees; and I urge each and every one of you to support H.R. 3573, the Keep Our Promises to America's Military Retirees Act. 260 Members have now cosponsored this bill so that we may keep our word. It is important that the Federal Government keep its word. You cannot expect retention to improve in the military; you cannot expect that people are going to stay in as a career, when we will not keep our word to them.

Mr. Speaker, this should be one of our top priorities, because it is the right thing for the United States Government to do for the men and women that risked life and limb to defend this Nation.

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HEATING OIL CRISIS IN NEW YORK

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under a previous order of the House, the gentlewoman from New York (Ms. SLAUGHTER) is recognized for 5 minutes.

Ms. SLAUGHTER. Mr. Speaker, I simply want to bring to the attention of Congress the situation of the people that I represent in Monroe County, New York. Some of them are up there now trying to shovel snow off their roofs. We have the dubious distinction this year of having had more snow than anyplace in the United States, a distinction that we really prefer go to Buffalo or Oswego.

I have an extraordinary number of retired persons as well. In addition to the high cost of prescription drugs, they are now being forced to decide whether they will eat or pay the soaring home heating costs.

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The families have seen the price of home heating oil rise on an hourly basis. There has been no way to understand it, to plan for it, or to budget for it. They are upset, and those who are on low and fixed incomes are having to choose again between everything else that they do and heating their homes, which really is not a choice. With the temperatures that we have had this January and February, we have had over 21 days of straight snow this year. There is no option but not to freeze to death.

We have had numbers of truckers who have called us and told us that the extraordinary high rise in diesel fuel, over \$2 a gallon an increase, has made it impossible for many of them even to continue to run their rigs and they have put them aside until, as Washington says, help is on the way.

I understand what the President said that once this cold snap is over, that we hope that the prices will go down, but in the meantime, I have people who are in severe crisis. I am happy that there is going to be a summit tomorrow on this, but I frankly think that the cautious approach that the White House is taking is too little and too late.

We know that actions will speak louder than words. It is really critical that this year, because this is a debate, as my colleagues have pointed out, that we have year after year, that we do something about it to take care of these permanent needs that the Northeast has for heating assistance. I have joined on to legislation that I hope will do just that this year.

We hate to come every year and talk about how our people again are freezing to death, although I think we are really quite generous in helping when other Members of Congress come to the floor with problems in their district that nature has given to them. But it is really important that we do something about this this time.

Mr. Speaker, I am not sure why the prices have risen. I agree with the gentleman from New York (Mr. CROWLEY) who spoke previously that it needs a good investigation to make sure that at this time when temperatures are low that these costs are not deliberate. It is very important that we look at that.

In the meantime, I would like to urge the President and the Secretary of Energy to really include the action right now of releasing some oil from the strategic petroleum reserve. We must, as I said before, start a home-heating oil reserve in the Northeast so that we can have a long-term solution to this crisis.

One solution may be, as many speakers before me have pointed out, and I

know that the President had brought up one year, is that why should LIHEAP money, which is really used for low-income heating, be sent throughout the 50 States and the territories. Might it not be more important that we send it to places where it is needed, and I would like to have that looked into as well. But action and not delay is needed now.

So, on behalf of all of my constituents today who are out trying to shovel off the roof, to make sure that the pipes are not frozen, keeping the heat in the house as low as they can so that they can afford to eat, I want to say to my colleagues and to everyone in this Congress that Mother Nature waits on no one and that quick action is needed for the people of the Northeast.

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PRESCRIPTION DRUG BENEFITS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. OSE). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 6, 1999, the gentleman from Maine (Mr. ALLEN) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. ALLEN. Mr. Speaker, Congress is back in session; and while we are resuming our work, we have to attend first to part of the unfinished business of last year. All across this country, seniors are finding it harder and harder to take their prescription drugs, because they simply cannot afford to take the medication that their doctors tell them they must take. They are not following doctor's orders, simply because they cannot afford their medication. We have looked at this issue over the past year, the Democrats have looked at this issue, and are ready to go again, ready to do some work to relieve the problems that seniors and others are facing all around this country.

We need to do two things. First, we need to stop price discrimination against seniors. Second, we need to provide a universal prescription drug benefit under Medicare.

Let us start with what is going on in the real world. In the real world, many seniors are not filling their prescriptions or, when they do, they are taking one pill out of three. However, all across this country, they are finding they simply cannot afford to take the drugs that their doctors tell them they have to take.

Starting in my district of Maine, the First District of Maine and extending all across this country, the democratic staff of the Committee on Government Reform has done a series of studies. The first of those studies which I released in July of 1998 show this: on average, seniors pay twice as much for their medication as the drug company's best customers. Well, who are the best customers? They are HMOs, big hospitals, and the Federal Government itself buying prescription drugs for Medicaid recipients or for the Veterans' Administration. Twice as much. Seniors pay twice as much as the drug company's best customers.