

time, but they were corrected without having to go to a courthouse. In fact, the process worked so well that despite the U.S. 5th Court of Appeals' ruling that external appeals are violations of ERISA, Aetna and other HMO agreed to voluntarily submit disputes to the Independent Review Organizations for resolution.

Mr. Speaker, I stated earlier there have been only 17 lawsuits filed in Texas since we passed the Patients' Bill of Rights, and I believe the external appeals process has been instrumental in the success of our plan and is giving the patients what they really want, access to timely, quality medical care while protecting the insurers from the costs of litigation.

I believe that the success of the Ganske-Dingell-Norwood bill provides that same process that we would have. Patients must exhaust all internal and external appeals process before they can proceed to the courts.

They need to be swift appeals, and there is no doubt that any patient who is trying to get health care really does not want to sue their insurance plan. They really want to get their health care.

Let me talk about the costs. We have heard the opponents of the Patients' Bill of Rights argue that it would increase costs so much that an employee would start dropping their coverage. In Texas, however, providing patients with the same kind of protections has not lead to an increase in costs.

Like I said earlier, the costs of insureds, HMOs managed care insurance in Texas has not grown any more than in States that do not have the same protections. Texas premiums are growing at the same rate of insurance rates in other States that do not have a patients' bill of rights.

Even if the costs do go up, as some estimates suggest, it will only rise 4 percent, that equals about \$2 per month per patient. Let us face it, \$2 a month is not a lot of money these days. It barely buys you anything, maybe a cup of coffee, no frills. If you want a cappuccino, you are going to have to pay \$3; six first class stamps; two 20-ounce bottles of Coca Cola or Diet Coke, if you are like I am; for \$2, a 30-minute long distance call; and in some parts of the country, \$2 will not even buy you a gallon of gas.

But, for Mr. Speaker, \$2 a month patients can have access to specialists and emergency room visits and their doctors are working for them and not against them. That is why I do not think it will even be \$2; but even if it is, it is worth that amount of money.

Mr. Speaker, I see my colleague here and there are a lot of issues that I know this House will be talking about that. We passed an HMO reform bill last year, the Ganske-Dingell-Norwood bill, and I would hope this House would again pass a strong HMO reform bill similar to what is passed in some of our States.

Serving 20 years in the legislature, I have always said that States are a lab-

oratory, if States can successfully pass legislation and it works, then we need to look at that on the national basis.

We have had 4 years of experience in Texas, and I think we need to pass a similar law to what Texas has on the national basis, but we also need to make sure that if employers are involved in medical decisions that they are also held liable just like doctors. Again, I do not want our employers involved in medical decisions because they have enough trouble producing their products and in trying to keep this country great.

Ms. EDDIE BERNICE JOHNSON of Texas. Mr. Speaker, as a Member of Congress from the great state of Texas and a former nurse. I am particularly concerned about this House's ability to pass a Patients' Bill of Rights. We have all heard the horror stories of patients denied treatment or hospitalization as a result of the assessment of an insurance company or HMO. We have all heard questions from our constituents about federal action on the Patients' Bill of Rights. We all know there is a desire and a need to have a system which allows patients a voice in their health care. Yet because of the fear that the cost of lawyers will drive up the cost of health care, we have failed to act. Mr. Speaker, it is time to replace fear with facts.

In Texas, we passed a Patients' Bill of Rights in 1997. This bill was passed over the veto of then-Governor George Bush. Since that time, the Texas Patients' Bill of Rights has provided patient protection for many of the residents of my state. The bill of rights allows Texans with health insurance to have direct access to specialists. When a patient sees a doctor, the medical professional is allowed to discuss all treatment options, even those not covered by the plan. If there is a disagreement between patient and provider, there is a strong Independent Review Organization that ensures that patients have an appeal process that recommends solutions. All of these protections have been accomplished with only a slight increase in health care premiums. America deserves the kind of patient protections that Texans currently enjoy. Mr. Speaker, I hope that Members of this House can explain to their constituents, why they cannot have the standard of care currently enjoyed in Texas.

THE FUTURE OF AGRICULTURE IN AMERICA

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. KENNEDY of Minnesota). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 3, 2001, the gentleman from South Dakota (Mr. THUNE) is recognized for 60 minutes.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. Speaker, tomorrow we will engage in a debate on this floor which I think will be the first volley of what will be a very long discussion here in the House about the future of agriculture in America.

Tomorrow we will pass legislation here that provides emergency disaster assistance to our producers. Unfortunately, Mr. Speaker, as that bill moves through the Committee on Agriculture, of which I am a Member, it was pared down from what was originally proposed. I believe that it was a mistake,

Mr. Speaker, to do that, because we have a responsibility to the producers of this country.

Frankly, we had set expectations at a certain level about what we were going to do to help address the catastrophic low prices which we have seen now for year after year after year.

Mr. Speaker, the legislation that will move through the House tomorrow, is in my judgment inadequate and insufficient to get the job done for American agriculture in this year. What that debate will do, Mr. Speaker, is begin to lay the groundwork for the ensuing debate and that is the debate over foreign policy in this country.

We are long overdue of making some changes in agricultural policy for America. The farm bill debate is under way in the House of Representatives. It has been for some time. We have been listening intently across this country to producers about what they want to see in the next farm bill and we have listened from coast to coast in different regions. And we have had hearings after hearings after hearings here in Washington from different commodity groups and grower groups.

Mr. Speaker, it is clear in my mind that producers across the country want a bill, a farm bill that is written specifically for producers, not one that is written with some ulterior policy objective in mind or some other agenda, but a farm bill that is specifically written by producers for producers and hopefully will lay the framework that will help govern our foreign policy as we head into the years ahead.

Mr. Speaker, this is a very, very desperate time for American agriculture. We are seeing people leave the farm. We are seeing outmigration from rural areas. We are seeing the family farm structure which, in my mind, is the backbone of America, start to disintegrate partly because farmers and ranchers cannot make a living on their farms and ranches, as a consequence, we have seen prices fall; we have seen costs go up; we have seen the bottom line get squeezed to where producers are either forced to sell out, go out of business.

They are, unfortunately, in a position where the future of agriculture is very much in question in America, and I think it is high time that this Congress take necessary steps to correct that.

Granted, foreign policy is not going to solve this. We are going to write a farm bill. That is not going to be the only solution. There are a lot of issues that impact agriculture today. We lost some foreign markets. We need to recapture those markets.

We need strong trade policies that recognize that we have to have a level playing field around the world in order for our producers to compete and compete fairly, but when we write this foreign policy, we need to bear in mind, I believe, Mr. Speaker, that there are some very necessary component parts that need to be in it. Of course, the

most immediate is what do we do when prices are where they are today.

We need to have a countercyclical repayment program that provides assistance to our producers when prices fall; and as they begin to improve that, that government assistance begins to phase out, but we need a program that recognizes those types of rises and falls in the market and allows our producers to continue to farm.

I believe that we need a heavier emphasis on conservation. We need a farm bill that encourages our producers, provides incentives so that they will implement conservation practices, enhance our soil and our water, add the wildlife production across this country.

It is going to be very important, I believe, Mr. Speaker, in this next bill that we have a strong conservation component and make the necessary investment to not only support our producers, but also to improve the land and the water, to help address the questions of marginal lands and erodible lands that oftentimes have led to problems in our streams and our rivers.

Mr. Speaker, I would also add that as we look at this farm bill, I think it is important that we also look at the entire context of rural economy. Yes, we talk about commodity programs and all of these other issues, but we are losing jobs on our Main Streets.

We are expressing an economic downturn that has gone on now for several years, and we need to do something to reverse that.

I think it is critical that this farm bill also highlight and recognize the importance of value-added agriculture, of allowing our producers and providing incentives and encouraging them to take what we grow, what we do well, which is production agriculture. We do it very efficiently in this country, and to reach up the ag marketing chain and capture more of the value of our agricultural products by processing, whether it is ethanol, which is something that has been a huge success story in my part of the country, soybean processing, flour milling, seed crushing, value-added meats, finding those markets, Mr. Speaker, that will enable our producers not only to compete by putting more money into their pocket, but by adding economic activity and jobs on Main Streets around this country.

Mr. Speaker, as we debate this bill tomorrow, it is the first step in what I hope will be a very spirited and vigorous debate about the future not only of agricultural policy, but about the future of rural America and what we are going to do to save and preserve our rural way of life.

It is not just an economic issue. It relates to health care and education, to telecommunications, all of those things that people in rural areas expect and need to survive and to prosper and to continue to add to the overall well-being and the overall Gross Domestic Product of this great economy, because, I believe, that as our rural econ-

omy goes, eventually so will our national economy go.

Food security is very closely tied, Mr. Speaker, to national security.

I would like to touch on another subject, which I think ties into that whole issue here in a moment, and that is the question of energy policy and where we need to be going, because not only have we seen prices fall in agriculture, but we have also seen costs go up.

Agriculture is a very energy intensive industry and we need to address what I believe has become a crisis not only in agriculture but a crisis in America, and that is our lack of affordable energy for farmers, for ranchers, for working families, for our small businesses to keep this economy expanding and adding to the quality of life here in America.

Mr. Speaker, this evening I am joined here on the floor by the gentleman from the third district of Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE). He is a new Member of Congress. He has been a leader on the Committee on Agriculture. He cares deeply about the future of agriculture in his district which borders mine.

I think we share a lot of similar concerns, a lot of similar anxiety as we view down the horizon and look at the future of agriculture and the future of our rural economy.

Mr. Speaker, the gentleman from Nebraska has had a very distinguished career prior to coming to this body, but I know that he cares as deeply as I do and as passionately as I do about the future of our rural economy and wants to be engaged in the debates that are going to ensue here in the next few weeks and months about how we shape and build a better quality of life for people who live in rural areas of America.

Mr. Speaker, I yield to the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE) and welcome him to this discussion and let him know that I am anxious to work with him as we begin the debate over foreign policy in this country.

Mr. OSBORNE. Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the gentleman from South Dakota (Mr. THUNE) for yielding to me. The gentleman is very correct in the fact that we do share a great deal of interest in agriculture.

We come from similar geographical regions; a lot of problems that are very common in South Dakota are very common in Nebraska.

The gentleman really set a very fine backdrop as to some of the difficulties in agriculture, and so often as I travel around people will say, why do we need to help agriculture? Nobody helps the grocer and nobody helps the implement dealer. In coaching, if you do not win enough games, they fire you, so why should you get any help from agriculture?

Mr. Speaker, I guess I would like to expand on some of the things that the gentleman said earlier that seemed to make some sense to me. First of all, in our country we spend only 9 percent of our discretionary income for agri-

culture; and in most nations around the world, we are probably spending anywhere from 30 percent to maybe 60 percent.

Food is very cheap, relatively speaking, in the United States. Many people go to the supermarket and think it is very high, but compared to the rest of the world, it is very cheap.

The farmer only gets a fraction of that 9 percent, probably 1 percent, 1½ percent at most of that 9 percent. So farm income is very marginal.

The other thing I would like to point out is that food is critical. Everybody is very aware of the great agony and the anguish that we are currently experiencing in regard to energy. Certainly if OPEC decides to tighten the screws or double or triple our petroleum costs, this country could very well grind to a halt within 2 months to 3 months, but that crisis is nothing compared to what we would have if we had a food crisis.

So one of the interesting things that I have noticed is that in Europe agriculture is subsidized to the tune of anywhere from \$300, \$400, \$500 an acre, and some people say, why would they subsidize food to that degree or agriculture to that degree, because in the United States, the subsidy is roughly \$60 to \$70 per acre.

□ 2045

I think the reason is that those folks have run out of food. They know what it was like in World War I, World War II, and they have experienced it. They realize that a good, safer food supply is critical to their survival. So there is no question that what our farmers and ranchers are doing is very, very important.

The other thing I would like to point out is that, compared to most industry, agriculture is different. Let me flesh that out a little bit.

First of all, if General Motors overproduces and they have got too many automobiles, they shut down a plant or an assembly line, and they bring their inventory into line with the demand. But in agriculture, you cannot do that. Farmers sitting out there cannot align his crop to world conditions. So one really cannot control the supply side like one does in most industry.

The second thing is that agriculture is almost entirely dependent upon the weather. Most industry, of course, is somewhat independent of the weather. Usually, most of it is conducted indoors. So one can do everything right, and one can have everything going just perfectly, and a 20 minute hail storm finishes the whole year's work. Of course, the drought is the same way. So it is very dependent upon the weather.

Then lastly, as compared to most industry, in agriculture the farmer does not set the price. So if one is manufacturing a product, or if one is selling in a grocery store, one sets the price. If people do not buy it, one lowers it. But the farmer essentially takes what he can get. He does not set the price.

So there is some significant differences, and I think that is one reason why people have to understand that there needs to be a farm program. It is not something we can simply throw open on the world market and hope that we will survive.

Lastly, just let me mention this. If we do try to go to the low-cost producer, we did that in energy. Back in the 1970s OPEC would sell us oil for \$3, \$4, \$5 a barrel. So we said, okay, that is great. We cannot produce it, we cannot pump it for that amount. So we are going to cap our wells and quit exploring, and we are going to farm our energy, our petroleum supply out to OPEC. We did that, and they took it gratefully.

Of course, now that price has gone up as high as \$35 a barrel, and they are in control, and we have got 60 percent of our dependence on petroleum going to OPEC.

We can do the same thing in agriculture very quickly. We can say, okay, in Brazil one can have two growing seasons. Land is 2- or \$300 an acre. One has no environmental regulations. Labor is cheap. So we are not going to help our farmers, and we are going to let the low-cost producer win. Then in that case, we will be dependent on overseas sources for our food supply. I do not think we can allow that to happen in terms of national security.

So, basically, those are some of my thoughts as to why we need a farm program. I know that the gentleman from South Dakota (Mr. THUNE) is interested in many different aspects of this issue.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the gentleman's observations and comments, and I would echo much of what he just said in terms of the need to have a level playing field. The United States has not had the experience that many of the countries around the world have had, knowing what it is like to go without. A lot of the countries that we have to compete with subsidize their agricultural sectors on a level that we do not in this country. Yet we arguably are trying to compete with them, and the international marketplace has become very competitive.

So it is important, Mr. Speaker, that we look at what we can do to drop those trade barriers internationally so that America can compete, and compete on a level playing field with our foreign competitors, because I believe our producers are the most efficient producers in the world, but they have to have that opportunity, and they have to have the same set of rules to adhere to and abide by and play by as the other countries around the world.

As the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE) noted, one of the things I think is going to be very important in the future, too, is that we have renewable resources. We have corn. We have products that can be used and converted into other products, that can help address and diversify our energy supply in this country, our production,

and make us less dependent upon foreign countries for our energy supply.

One of the people who has become a new leader on that subject is the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. KENNEDY), whose district also shares the border with mine, someone who has been a very strong advocate for ethanol, for other value-added industries, who understands clearly how important it is that we take what we do well, that we take production agriculture, figure out a way to harness that, to add value to our commodities, our raw commodities, and then be able to put more dollars in the pockets of our producers, and also to add economic activity in our rural economies and our rural main streets.

So I am happy to yield to the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. KENNEDY) for his thoughts on that subject as well as his thoughts on where we go in terms of farm policy as we get into this debate in the weeks and months ahead here in the Congress.

Mr. KENNEDY of Minnesota. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from South Dakota for all his good efforts and for yielding to me. We look forward to working together to improve the farm bill for our farmers in southwest Minnesota.

I also thank the references to growing demand by tapping the energy market. I often tease groups of farmers that I am with that we all seem to be well enough fed in southern Minnesota, at least in most parts of our State, and we have room to go in terms of feeding the world and feeding our country. But we have our best opportunity for growing demand in our energy markets.

I am just still very pleased with the President's decision to deny California to waiver from their Clean Air Act and know in my recent conversations over the weekend with farmers across our district and with people that work with ethanol plants, that is going to result in a great boon to our farmers throughout the country.

This is something, in the case of ethanol, that is a win-win-win situation. It is win in that it helps us create a renewable and domestic source of energy, something that we are in great need of today. It helps us with the environment by helping gas burn cleaner. It helps us provide jobs to many of our local communities. I have six ethanol plants throughout our district. It helps as well very much with the growing demand for our products. There is that. There is biodiesel we will be working on and certainly opening up markets, as the gentleman from South Dakota referred to.

These are all not necessarily parts of our farm bill, but something that we in the Committee on Agriculture are fighting hard to make sure we advance. In the end, they result in more flexibility to do things with the farm bill because they naturally increase the price of products.

But our farm bill needs to be focused on making sure that we have counter-

cyclical payments to help our farmers in times of need as we clearly have today, and coming up with a program that gives them better support than they currently have; also, making sure that we have a strong insurance program and expanding our conservation efforts to make sure that we are nurturing the environment at the same time that we are growing the food to feed the world.

Finally, in rural development, and I was pleased to be able to award two rural development grants in our district to help increase value-added farmer-owned production.

So those are the things we will be focusing on. But I, too, was disappointed in the House Committee on Agriculture's recent votes to reduce supplemental aid to farmers in the new farm package to \$5.5 billion. I opposed the amendment offered by the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) to reduce that supplemental aid and supported the proposal of the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST), our committee Chair, to provide \$6.5 billion of funding.

Our farmers are struggling, and we need to provide them with the aid they need. I voted for the final passage because we need to give them support. I hear that over and over as I am out in the district.

But we are at a time when our prices remain low. We have had very poor planting conditions in our part of the country, and it is likely to reduce our yields. Our production costs are higher than they have been with the increased cost of energy. So this is really not the time to reduce the funding that the farmers have historically received during these times of need.

I hope this is a first step in progress that we can make to continue to assist our farmers. We do need to move forward on a fast timetable on passing the farm, a new farm bill this year. I am very pleased that the House is moving forward on that.

I am working together with the gentleman from Arkansas (Mr. BERRY), and I received over 90 signatures from my fellow colleagues here in the House to encourage that both bodies move forward on a pace to get the farm bill done this year. Our farmers have waited long enough. We have ideas for needed relief. We need to move forward on them.

We have the budget flexibility. It is time to write the farm bill this year. Besides, I think we would all prefer, our farmers would prefer and deserve that we focus on policy this year rather than politics next year.

With that, I look forward to working with the gentleman from South Dakota.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. Speaker, I simply note as well that it is important in my mind that we do this farm bill this year, that we set the policy parameters so that our producers know with certainty going into the next planting season.

Now, there is a tendency among some in this body and some here in the Congress to say, well, let us wait and do this next year. After all, then it will be a political year. But, frankly, I think heads think a lot more clearly and judgment is a lot more focused in the absence of the political climate that we will be encountering next year. I think this is the time that we need to do this.

So as the House prepares to write their farm policy, I would hope that we will be joined, as the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. KENNEDY) noted, by our colleagues in the Senate, because it is important that we get it put in place this year.

Mr. Speaker, one of the issues that I think ties into this whole debate is the cost of doing business in agriculture. We have all talked about prices. Farmers cannot control prices. They have to take what they get at the elevator, what they get from the packer. They do not have a whole lot of control of what they receive. But of late, it has also become true they do not have a whole lot of control of what it costs them to do business.

Look at the input and cost of energy in this country and what has happened as we have seen prices go up and up and up in natural gas, so fertilizer is up 90 percent, the price for diesel fuel. Farming is a very energy-intensive business.

In States like my State of South Dakota, the second, probably one of the next major economic benefits in my statement is tourism, the travel industry. As gas prices go up and up and up, one sees people look into their pocketbooks and saying, I have less and less to spend, to travel.

The farmer cannot control the rising costs of what the expense is for him to stay in business and to continue to plant the crop every year and harvest it.

Mr. Speaker, that is something that this Congress needs to zero in on. We have a responsibility because we have for, I should not say we, but for the last, essentially last administration, last 8 years, not had an energy policy. We sit and we point fingers, and we will blame the Clinton administration, and they will now blame the Bush administration, and the Republicans blame the Democrats, and the Democrats blame the Republicans, and it goes on and on and on.

The American people are sitting out there and saying, wait a minute. What about us? What about what it costs us to drive to work in the morning? What about the cost of transporting our kids to and from school, the cost of the family vacation, the cost of the home heating bill in the winter months?

These are issues that impact directly and profoundly people across this country. It is important that we focus on this, that we develop an energy policy, forget the fact about who is responsible and the reason that we did not have an energy policy for the last 8 years, and we all have our opinions about that. I

do not think that the last administration paid much attention to this.

But the reality is we have a problem that is not a Republican problem or Democrat problem, it is an American problem. It is something that directly impacts working families across this country.

Now, this President, President Bush, has put forward a proposal. And not everybody may like it, but he has provided leadership. He has put together an energy policy for this country. This manual is 170 pages long. It has 105 specific recommendations. It is comprehensive. It is detailed.

It has been roundly criticized because people say, well, it does not put enough emphasis here or here or here. The fact is this is a balanced approach. Now, there are parts of it I may not like. There are parts of it that the individual Members of Congress may not like. But the reality is the President of the United States has given us a framework to work with. He has given us an energy policy that is specific and comprehensive and detailed, that includes recommendations for executive action, that includes directives to agencies, the changes they can make, and which includes specific recommendations for the Congress to act on through legislation. Some of them deal with energy supply. Some of them deal with renewable energies and alternative sources of energies, something that I care deeply about. Some of them deal with conservation. In fact, half of the recommendations in here deal with conservation or renewable sources of energy, alternatives.

But the fact of the matter is, Mr. Speaker, that we need to be looking at this in the context of what can we do to, one, increase supply of energy in this country, or, two, reduce demand. The rest is conversation.

We can have this discussion, but the fact is how do we get more supply of energy, because the demand is growing for energy, and the supply is staying flat or even dropping off. So the gap between what we use, what we consume, and what we produce is growing every day to the point that Saddam Hussein is going to be writing the energy policy for this country if we fail to do it.

□ 2100

So I hope we can have an honest debate. Let us talk about finding sources of oil. Let us talk about domestic sources of petroleum, and, if we can, get at that in an environmentally sound way; and I happen to believe there are places in this country where that can be done. But let us have an honest debate, not one that is based on emotion, not one that is based upon some preconceived notion about how things ought to be, but one based on science and fact and truth, Mr. Speaker. Let us get after this problem for the American people.

I am also joined this evening on the floor by the gentleman from the first district of Kansas, what they call The

Big First. My State of South Dakota, the district I represent, is 77,000 square miles, just slightly larger than the gentleman from the first district, which I think is about 66,000 square miles. But the gentleman from Kansas is someone who has been a strong advocate, a strong leader on agricultural issues in this country, someone who cares deeply about the plight of rural areas of America, about the quality of life of our citizens who live there.

So I am happy to be joined on the floor this evening by the gentleman from Kansas (Mr. MORAN); and, Mr. Speaker, I yield to him.

Mr. MORAN of Kansas. I thank the gentleman from South Dakota for yielding to me, and I am pleased to participate with my colleagues from Nebraska and South Dakota and Minnesota. And I know there are many other Members of Congress who care deeply about the issues we are attempting to address and to bring to our colleagues and the country's attention this evening.

I came to Congress with a goal in mind, and that goal was to do what I could do as one Member of Congress, as one individual, to have a little prosperity in rural America, to have an opportunity for my children to raise their families in rural communities in our State or across the country. So much of what goes on in this body, in this House of Representatives, and goes on here in our Nation's capital, affects whether or not there is prosperity in Kansas and whether or not there is prosperity across the country. It also affects the likelihood that the next generation can enjoy the quality of life that we have enjoyed in my State of Kansas and across the country in rural States around our Nation.

So we have our challenges and our tasks before us. It is difficult to meet those challenges. Rural America is suffering. We have heard a lot during my early days in Congress about the booming national economy, and it became clear to me that the folks of my State in agriculture and in the oil and gas industry were financing this booming national economy and that we were left behind. Seems to me that those of us who care about rural America, the tasks before us are related to agriculture and whether or not farmers can break even and can earn a little money and whether or not the next generation of our young people in the farming communities have the opportunity to return to their communities and return to their family farms.

It is about small business and whether or not businesses are going to remain on Main Street America across our country. It is about the rules and regulations and taxes and all the requirements and paperwork and bureaucracy that we put in front of businessmen and women and tell them to compete and to survive. And yet in many of the communities I represent, whether or not a grocery store is on Main Street is the main talk of economic development in the community.

It is not about whether or not there is a new factory arriving in town but whether or not there is a hardware store and a pharmacy.

So much of what we do here increases the cost of being in business, and yet we do not have growing populations such that we can spread those increased costs to meet those rules and regulations and taxes and workers compensation premiums and health care costs among more customers. So it is agriculture, it is small business, it is transportation. How do we make certain we can get from one community to another, that we can get our agricultural products to market?

Not too many months ago we received complaints from our constituents about soybeans being imported into the United States from Brazil, from South America. And my constituents, my farmers who grow soybeans, could not understand how can they bring soybeans and soy meal from South America to the United States and sell it in North Carolina cheaper than we can get it there from the middle of the country. The answer was our transportation costs. It was cheaper to put it on a boat from South America and ship it to the United States than it was to put it on a train and move it just halfway across our country.

Transportation costs matter to us; and whether or not we have roads and bridges and highways and railroads, and even airports and aviation will affect whether or not rural America remains alive and well.

It is about education and technology. I know the gentleman from Nebraska has championed issues related to whether or not we are going to have access to technology in our communities.

And awfully important to us is whether or not we have access to health care. Our ability to keep hospital doors open, to keep physicians and nurses and home health care agencies in our communities has a great effect upon whether or not those communities survive. So many of our people living in rural communities are seniors, and they will not be able to take the risk to live in a community where the hospital is not there anymore. Young kids who are just starting their families do not want to raise their children where there are no doctors.

So those of us who care about rural America need to make certain that we protect the delivery of health care in rural America. And this issue called Medicare and that we deal with in this Congress and in this Nation's capital affects us greatly.

So we have our challenges. Tonight we wanted to talk a bit about agriculture. It is clear to me that without prosperity on the farm, there is no prosperity in the communities of Kansas. And that is true whether you live in Topeka, Wichita, or Overland Park, the larger cities of our State, or whether you live in Goodland, Smith Center, or Protection. Agriculture matters, and the future of our economy and our

State is determined whether or not our farmers and ranchers are surviving, whether or not they are making ends meet, and whether they have anything left over at the end of the year.

I was taken to task by one of my constituents for the amount of time that I spend dealing with agricultural issues, and the thought was the farmers are doing just fine and that I do not need to worry so much or work so hard. The reality is that we have almost no sons, no daughters either staying in our communities or returning to the family farm after going to college. And if there was any prosperity or any money to be made in agriculture, those young men and women would be back on the farm. It is not happening.

This is certainly an agricultural week in Congress. The plight of our farmers and our ranchers is not forgotten here. We have, as has been mentioned earlier tonight, addressed an issue of lost payments for market, the low price, what I call disaster assistance. The Committee on Agriculture will have a bill on the House floor tomorrow dealing with this assistance to try to tide the farmers over for a while longer until we can do some other things to keep them in business.

Farmers do not want payments from the government; they want to earn their living from the markets. But unfortunately, government puts many stumbling blocks in their way. And as the gentleman from Nebraska said, our competitors, those particularly in the European communities, they are subsidized eight times what we are in the United States. My hands are going up because there is a bar graph in the office which reflects the Europeans subsidize agriculture eight times what we do in the United States. Yet we tell our farmers to farm the markets, to compete in the world. It is not a level playing field at all.

A pie chart in my office reflects that 82.5 percent of all subsidies to help export agriculture commodities around the world is provided by the European Community. Our slice of that pie is 2.5 percent. Yet we tell our farmers to compete in the world. Go out and grow the crops, sell them. Yet we have such an unlevel playing field.

We have trade embargoes and sanctions against other countries. The farmer did not ask for those; yet because of foreign policy, we conclude we cannot sell wheat or grain or meat products to some country around the world because we do not like their behavior. The reality is we do not change their behavior; we just cause our farmers, our ranchers to lose one more market.

It seems to me those of us who care about agriculture have to care about a farm bill and farm policy. That farm bill is going to be discussed, debated and written. This is my first time in Congress in which we have tried to draft a farm bill, and I am looking forward to being fully engaged in that debate. That will take place in the House

Committee on Agriculture during the month of July, and we will be back on this House floor with an agricultural bill that will be important to farmers.

But we have had low prices in many farm bills, so that is not the total answer. We have issues related to trade and sanctions and exports. These farm commodities must be assumed. We have great concerns about lack of competition in agriculture. Everybody that the farmer buys from and sells to is getting larger and larger, and the farmer feels the squeeze. We need to make sure our antitrust laws are effective and are enforced. So the challenges are there; and yet the reality is that without prosperity in agriculture, there is no prosperity in rural America.

We are in the middle of a wheat harvest in Kansas, and it is working its way from south to north. It has been to Texas and Oklahoma, it is now in Kansas working its way into Nebraska and South Dakota. We have lived in Kansas for the last several years with these terribly low commodity prices because we have had good yields. Last year the drought hit Kansas and decimated the soybean crop.

This year, in wheat harvests, the number of acres that will be harvested in Kansas is expected to be the lowest number of acres since 1957. So now this year not only will we have terribly low commodity prices but we have no crop to harvest, or a smaller crop to harvest; 56 million bushels less wheat to be harvested in Kansas it is estimated. And although the early harvest reports have been good, we have concerns about kernel bunt and rust. And, unfortunately, as has been mentioned by my colleagues, the increased cost of inputs, particularly fuel and fertilizer, estimated by our Kansas farm management database, is an increase of 33 percent in costs for fuel.

So our work is cut out for us. I look forward to working with my colleagues across the country to see that we have disaster assistance, the market loss assistance program tomorrow on the House floor, that it is passed and sent to the Senate and that it is addressed quickly, and that we have an agricultural policy, a farm bill through the Committee on Agriculture later this year. And I agree with the gentleman from Minnesota, it is critical that the Senate join us in addressing this issue. Our farmers and their bankers need to know what farm policy is going to be in this country.

This issue is important to me. It is not just whether farmers make a living. This is about a way of life, and it is a way of life that is evaporating in this country. It is about a way of life in which sons and daughters work side by side with moms and dads and grandparents, and where character and values and integrity is passed from one generation to the next. So although tomorrow we will be talking about dollars, what we are really talking about is a way of life, and a way of life that was the history of our Nation.

I look forward to joining my colleagues tonight and my colleagues throughout the year and my colleagues across the country to make sure that rural America is not forgotten in the United States House of Representatives. I yield back to the gentleman.

Mr. THUNE. I thank the gentleman from Kansas for yielding, and I would simply again say that we are joined geographically by the gentleman from Nebraska, but strong similarities in the concerns, the people that we represent, the topography of the land, the things that we raise, and absolutely the issues that we are concerned about with respect to the quality of life in rural areas of America.

As the gentleman from Kansas noted, so much of it is about agriculture because there is no prosperity in rural America unless agriculture is prospering. When we see these succeeding years of low prices, and in agriculture the last few years it seems like the prevailing economic theory has been that we lose a little bit on each sale, but we make up for it in volume. We have tried to make up for what we have lost in price in the numbers of bushels we produce; yet this year, as the gentleman from Kansas noted, we are seeing, because of weather and other related issues, all sorts of problems in getting the kinds of harvest and the kinds of yields necessary in order to make our farmers pencil out and break even.

I am anxious, along with my colleagues, to engage in this debate. I do believe that there is no question that when we deal with this whole issue of farm prosperity that it is about prices; it is also about the cost of production, the cost of energy, and that it is an issue which we are going to have to address.

I understand the gentleman from Texas (Mr. RODRIGUEZ), over here on my left, would like a minute; and I would be happy to yield to him for a moment.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Mr. Speaker, let me thank the gentleman first of all for bringing this up tonight. I think it is so important. I think we forget that we are all involved in agriculture when it comes to the issue of eating.

I represent a district that runs from San Antonio north to south, all the way to the Mexican border, and I take pride that I am the seventh producer of peanuts in the Nation. But I also do not take pride in the fact that we are having a rough time, as the gentleman has indicated. Nature determines a lot of times what happens to our farmers. It is something where they basically put all their money into that crop. I had one year, in 1998, where I had a major flood that destroyed a lot of the crops that we had. Previously, we had about 5 years straight where droughts hit and devastated a lot of our farmers. Those kind of things we forget.

One of the things that I think the gentleman mentioned, and that I think is important, is that we continue to

mention the importance of our national security when it comes to agriculture and food. We cannot depend on foreign food when it comes to our national security. We have got to make sure that we continue to grow that food in this country. Because I think that is also important, as mentioned earlier in the discussions, the fact that a lot of our farmers now are senior citizens. The young are choosing not to go into it because it is very difficult, and a lot of times there are not the profits, and the risks are just tremendous.

So we as a Congress and as a people need to make sure that we protect our farmers, and we need to do everything we can to make that happen. We talk about the minimum wage and the prevailing wage, but we very seldom talk about a prevailing price for that product that those farmers have. I think it is important that we do that. There is no doubt there is no way we can compete with Europe when they get subsidized. There is no way we can compete with Latin America, when they almost do not get paid for anything.

The bottom line is, for our national security, we have to make sure we have our farmers. And I want to thank the gentleman for being out here tonight talking about the ag bill and what we need to do. We need to make sure that that food continues to be on the tables.

Mr. THUNE. I thank the gentleman from Texas (Mr. RODRIGUEZ) for his comments. Again, agriculture is not a Republican or a Democrat issue. It is something that is important to the future of America and to our national security, and it is something that we need to be working as a body and focusing on in a cooperative way, in a bipartisan way, to try to solve some of these problems and see that our producers have a living wage, because they do not. All they ask for is a fair price for their products.

Unfortunately, as the gentleman from Nebraska pointed out earlier, because of the way that we have to compete with countries that subsidize their farm economies at much higher levels, it does put our producers at a competitive disadvantage. And that is something that we have to try and correct through our trade policies. But we have a responsibility as a Congress to right now focus like a laser beam on the farm bill, on writing a new farm policy, on the energy policy in this country to help increase the prices that farmers receive and to lower the prices they have to pay for their inputs so that that bottom line will begin to show up in the black again instead of in the red. This will help us, hopefully, keep our young people in this country on those family farms that form and shape the bedrock values of America.

□ 2115

I believe we are much better served as a culture if we have family farmers farming the land and producing the products and the commodities that we consume in this country and we export around the world.

The gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. OSBORNE) has been a leader on a number of issues, one of which is technology, and so many other issues which are important to rural America. I yield to him at this time for his thoughts on that matter.

Mr. OSBORNE. Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the preceding comments from the gentleman from Minnesota and the gentleman from Kansas.

Mr. Speaker, we talk about the new farm bill, and many times people hold out great promise on the farm bill, and it is not the whole answer. It will hopefully provide a safety net which will allow people to continue in farming. We have been losing 10 percent of our farmers every year. Sometimes people say you are keeping the inefficient people in business, but all the inefficient people are long since gone. All of the people left have skill and ability.

As I talk to the farmers in the Third District of Nebraska, so often I hear the statement, we do not want a subsidy, we want profitability. We want to make our living in the marketplace. I think other than a safety net, there are some things that we need to focus on.

Of course, Freedom to Farm had some good ideas behind it. One is basically the philosophy of Freedom to Farm was that the farmer would produce all that he could. The farmers produced fence row to fence row, and the government's part of the bargain were that they were going to provide the markets, make sure that we had free trade, fair trade. And I am sad to say that part of the bargain was not kept. We did not fully fund market access programs, foreign market development, and we continued to have foreign trade sanctions, trade embargoes.

We have great hope for the WTO and NAFTA. We would like to see tariffs on our goods at 40 to 60 percent come down to 10 percent, which is basically what we are charging goods coming into our country. In theory, these two organizations, NAFTA and World Trade Organization sound good, but most of the farmers I talk to are not happy about implementation. They do not feel that we have a level playing field and that we have been aggressive enough in our trade practices. We need to open up markets and fully fund the programs that we have in place to help our marketing procedures.

The President needs fast track authority, the ability to negotiate quickly trade negotiations. In the last few years, we have had over 200 international trade agreements drawn up, and the United States has participated in 2, 2 out of 200. So the President needs to be given this authority. This is something that will be coming down the road fairly quickly.

We have touched on value-added agriculture. That is a big part of profitability. We have talked about ethanol, which will add 15 to 20 cents per bushel of corn; and ethanol could triple with MTBE going by the wayside.

We currently have 62 ethanol plants in the United States, and that should

double or triple in the United States. We have 200,000 people employed in the ethanol industry, and \$4.5 billion a year being brought in by ethanol. And again, those numbers could double or triple very quickly, which would be a huge shot in the arm for agriculture.

Co-ops need to spring up. Some are occurring right now, where the farmer participates in all levels of the process, and, of course, makes more profit in the process. We think that value added is going to be very important.

Let me just touch on one other thing, and that is the research issue. So far the advantage that we have had in the United States has been technology in agriculture and infrastructure, the ability to move our products. As the gentleman from Kansas mentioned earlier, the infrastructure advantage is quickly disappearing. Other countries are beginning to move their products equally as well.

So the thing that leaves us with that is an edge in technology. So often groups that come before the Committee on Agriculture and present their ideas, research is sometimes left out. It is left out of the equation. For instance, in ethanol alone right now we can get a better conversion rate. It takes so much energy to produce a gallon of ethanol. The ethanol that is produced produces more energy than what it takes to produce the ethanol; but that could be double or even triple. We could use switchgrass and all kinds of products. We could plant switchgrass on CRP acres, which would make CRP more profitable. We need to keep working on BSE. Foot and mouth disease. Karnal bunt was mentioned earlier in regard to the wheat industry. This is a great concern. So I am a great advocate of making sure that we can ensure and maintain our edge in technology.

Of course, one last comment would be simply the fact that we are losing young people and losing population in rural areas. The reason we are losing them is that they are going places where they can get more money. And the reason that they can make more money is there is more technology and more telecommunications. So the digital divide has hit rural America very hard.

People will tell you that roughly 90 percent of new industry is not willing to go into an area unless there is broadband service and high-speed Internet access. We have to do everything that we can to make sure that the rural America has the ability to provide those kinds of services which will allow us to keep more of our young people at home.

Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the gentleman from South Dakota for allowing me to participate in this dialogue.

Mr. THUNE. Mr. Speaker, I would reinforce what the gentleman from Nebraska just said about technology. We do have a digital divide in this country. One of the things that separates us from more populated areas of the coun-

try is that having access to broadband services, high-speed Internet services, all of those things that improve the quality of life, allow for greater speed and efficiency in conducting business, and connecting rural areas with the rest of the world in a very timely and convenient way.

So as we talk about the issues that impact rural areas, obviously agricultural policy is at the heart of that, energy policy is at the heart of that. Also appropriate investment in our education for our young people, rural health care, quality of life, as the gentleman from Nebraska mentioned. We have aging population areas of this country which present some unique challenges and unique needs.

One of the things that we want to see is the young people have the opportunity, if they choose to, to grow up and raise their families in rural areas of this country, in our small towns and farms and ranches. We have seen a continual decrease in the number of farms across the country. In my State of South Dakota, we have about 32,000-plus farms and ranches. The average size of those operations is about 350 acres. So it is the small, it is the family farms that constitute the real backbone of the economy in rural areas. So many of these issues tie into that.

Again, as we talk about what we can do to improve the quality of life and provide incentives for investment there for the need for technology, I am co-sponsoring legislation that provides a tax credit for those companies that would go out and offer broadband services in rural areas. I believe we need tax incentives in place for value-added agriculture, small-producer ethanol tax credit legislation which I am sponsoring. Another piece of legislation that will help lower the capital barrier to investment in agriculture, value-added-type industries; tax credit for producers that will encourage farmer-owned cooperatives so farmers can take more control of their own destinies and begin to create opportunities and increase in the overall prices that they receive for their products. These are all issues that impact the future of rural America.

Mr. Speaker, as I would simply say in closing again, I think if we look at the things that the Congress has to deal with, they are many. We have all of the appropriations bills, the Patient Bill of Rights, campaign finance reform, and they are all important. But when you come down to it, there is nothing more important to the future of this country than putting in place a solid farm policy and an energy policy for America's future that will lessen our dependence on foreign sources of energy by utilizing the great renewable sources we have in America and finding those sources additional sources of energy.

Mr. Speaker, I am pleased to have an opportunity to discuss these issues and look forward to engaging in colloquies with my colleagues on these important issues for all Americans, including

those of us who choose to live in rural areas.

WOMEN AND CHILDREN IN AMERICA DENIED VITAL MEDICAL AND FOOD BENEFITS BECAUSE OF IMMIGRATION STATUS

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. KENNEDY of Minnesota). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 3, 2001, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. RODRIGUEZ) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. RODRIGUEZ. Mr. Speaker, this special order tonight is to highlight some injustices, an injustice that is not only unfair, but unwise. Tens of thousands of women and children in this country are denied vital medical and food benefits because of their immigration status. What does this policy say about our country, the richest in the world, especially now in these times of surplus? What kind of country are we building for our children when we say some are eligible and some are not, even though they have played by the rules?

These are people that are legal immigrants that have played by the rules. Today hundreds of thousands of women and children are left outside without assistance in times of need. These are people who are here legally. They have followed the guidelines. They have paid taxes. They work. They are individuals that are out there baby-sitting our children, that pick up our trash. These people have been working hard, and they are strong Americans.

But in 1996, Congress decided that it was not the American benefit to provide safety net services to the communities that contribute so much. Last week we observed the first International French Citizen Day. It is only fitting that we recognize the contributions of this community and restore their access to the food and medical assistance that they need. I strongly believe that we need to look at this as a national public health issue.

When children go sick because their families cannot afford care, it is a public health issue. When pregnant women cannot get prenatal care, it is a public health issue. When pregnant women and young children do not have essential nutrition that they need, it is a public health issue. Ultimately it impacts on more than just our health, it hurts our educational system and economic possibilities.

□ 2130

Children who go to school hungry will not perform to the best of their abilities. Nor will they achieve the full potential that they have. We all lose when we do not provide them access to good quality care and good nutrition.

As I need to remind my colleagues, this is a Nation of immigrants, a Nation whose strength has come from hard work, of those who have fled persecution, from those who have left