

expired 1 year ago today. Although both the Senate and the House have passed comprehensive, multiyear legislation to reauthorize those programs, a conference agreement still has not been worked out. As a result, today the Senate is passing an 8-month extension, the sixth short-term extension since TEA-21 expired. The inherent uncertainty of short-term extensions has made it difficult for State and local governments and transit agencies to make decisions regarding construction, maintenance, and operations.

I want to speak for a moment about the transit program, which falls under the jurisdiction of the Senate Banking Committee. In the Banking Committee's reauthorization hearings, we heard extensive testimony on the critical role of transit in reducing congestion, strengthening our national economy, and improving our quality of life. Transit ridership is at record levels, a testament to Americans' growing need for safe, reliable transportation choices. The same can be said for the other modes as well: demand is increasing along our entire transportation network.

Increased investment is essential if we are to keep up with this demand. The U.S. Department of Transportation has estimated that an average of \$127 billion per year is needed over the next two decades to maintain and improve the condition of our highways, bridges, and transit systems. Other estimates show an even greater need. I believe that failure to make the needed investment will result in the continued deterioration of our existing infrastructure, threatening our future mobility and economic strength. Such investment would also have a positive impact in the near term: according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, each \$1 billion invested in transportation infrastructure creates 47,500 jobs.

In an effort to begin addressing these needs, the Banking Committee passed a reauthorization of the Federal transit program in February of this year. That bill authorized \$56.5 billion over 6 years for transit, a substantial increase over TEA-21. As a result of Banking Committee Chairman SHELBY's leadership in developing that piece of legislation, the Federal Public Transportation Act of 2004 was reported out of the Banking Committee unanimously. The Banking Committee bill was incorporated into S. 1072, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act, a 6-year multimodal reauthorization bill, which passed through the Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support.

Notwithstanding the passage in both the Senate and the House of reauthorization bills calling for substantially increased investment, the administration has not been willing to support the kind of investment needed to meet our pressing transit and highway needs. Without a serious commitment from the administration to make such investments, it has been impossible to

move forward in the conference process.

Until that process is completed, it is essential that our States and local communities be able to continue to operate and maintain our Nation's roads, bridges, and transit systems. The legislation considered by the Senate today would allow Federal assistance to continue through May 31, 2005, and provides that once a multiyear reauthorization bill is completed, the budgetary firewalls protecting highway and transit spending will be extended around the total amounts authorized for fiscal year 2005 in that multiyear bill. I hope that in the next 8 months the Administration will work cooperatively with the Congress to produce a comprehensive reauthorization bill that will provide the needed resources to address the Nation's urgent transportation needs.

Mr. FRIST. I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read a third time and passed, the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table, and any statements be printed in the RECORD.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, this could not have been done without Senator BYRD and Senator STEVENS. I have no objection.

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

The bill (H.R. 5183) was read the third time and passed.

MEASURES READ THE FIRST TIME—H.R. 4596 AND H.R. 4606

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I understand there are two bills at the desk, and I ask for their first reading, en bloc.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bills by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 4596) to amend Public Law 97-435 to extend the authorization for the Secretary of the Interior to release certain conditions contained in a patent concerning certain land conveyed by the United States to the Eastern Washington University until December 31, 2009.

A bill (H.R. 4606) to authorize the Secretary of the Interior, acting through the Bureau of Reclamation and in coordination with other Federal, State, and local government agencies, to participate in the funding and implementation of a balanced, long-term groundwater remediation program in California, and for other purposes.

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask for its second reading and, in order to place the bills on the calendar under the provisions of rule XIV, I object to my own request, en bloc.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The bills will have their second reading on the next legislative day.

MEASURE PLACED ON THE CALENDAR—S. 2866

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I understand that there is a bill at the desk and due for its second reading.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will read the bill by title for the second time.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 2866) to amend the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 to clarify the authority of the Secretary of Agriculture and the Commodity Credit Corporation to enter into memorandums of understanding with a State regarding the collection of approved State commodity assessments on behalf of the State from the proceeds of marketing assistance loans.

Mr. INHOFE. In order to place the bill on the calendar under the provisions of rule XIV, I object to further proceedings.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The objection having been heard, the bill will be placed on the calendar.

AMENDMENT TO SAFE DRINKING WATER ACT

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 502, H.R. 2771.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2771) to amend the Safe Drinking Water Act to reauthorize the New York City Watershed Protection Program.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. INHOFE. I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read the third time and passed; that the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table; and that any statements relating thereto be printed in the RECORD, without further intervening or action or debate.

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

The bill (H.R. 2771) was read the third time and passed.

LIMITATIONS AND EXTENSION FOR CERTAIN COASTAL WETLAND CONSERVATION PROJECTS

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 670, S. 2495.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 2495) to strike limitations on funding and extend the period of authorization for certain coastal wetland conservation projects.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. INHOFE. I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read a third time and passed; the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table; and that any statements relating to the bill be printed in the RECORD.

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

The bill (S. 2495) was read the third time and passed, as follows:

S. 2495

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. COASTAL WETLAND CONSERVATION PROJECT FUNDING.

(a) FUNDING.—Section 306 of the Coastal Wetlands Planning, Protection, and Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. 3955) is amended—

(1) in subsection (a), by striking “, not to exceed \$70,000,000.”;

(2) in subsection (b), by striking “, not to exceed \$15,000,000.”; and

(3) in subsection (c), by striking “, not to exceed \$15,000,000.”.

(b) PERIOD OF AUTHORIZATION.—Section 4(a) of the Dingell-Johnson Sport Fish Restoration Act (16 U.S.C. 777c(a)) is amended in the second sentence by striking “2009” and inserting “2019”.

AMENDING FISH AND WILDLIFE ACT OF 1956

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 673, H.R. 2408.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 2408) to amend the Fish and Wildlife Act of 1956 to reauthorize volunteer programs and community partnerships for national wildlife refuges, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. INHOFE. I ask unanimous consent that the bill be read a third time and passed; the motion to reconsider be laid upon the table; and that any statements relating to the bill be printed in the RECORD.

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

The bill (H.R. 2408) was read the third time and passed.

IMPROVING ACCESS TO ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES ACT OF 2004

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the HELP Committee be discharged from further consideration of H.R. 4278, the assistive technology bill, and the Senate proceed to its immediate consideration.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (H.R. 4278) to amend the Assistive Technology Act of 1998 to support programs of grants to States to address the assistive technology needs of individuals with disabilities, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Mr. GREGG. Mr. President, today, I join my colleague, the Senator from Iowa, Mr. HARKINS, and other Members, in seeking final passage of the Assistive Technology Act of 2004.

Senator HARKIN and I were determined to make the reauthorization of this piece of legislation a bipartisan process from the beginning. We have worked closely with the House of Representatives, Departments of Education, Labor, and Commerce, and the Small Business Administration as well as the, business, and research and development communities, the Assistive Technology Act Projects, the Alternative Financing Programs, and the disability community. Together we

have successfully crafted a bipartisan and bicameral bill that we are all proud of. This bill follows the administration's lead, and the goals that President Bush set forth in the New Freedom Initiative. We are confident that the bill will be overwhelmingly supported by the President and increase access to assistive technologies for thousands of individuals with disabilities. I am also submitting several letters of support for the bill, from various groups, for the RECORD.

On February 1, 2001, President Bush announced the New Freedom Initiative—a comprehensive program to promote the full participation of people with disabilities in all areas of society by expanding education and employment opportunities, promoting increased access into daily community life, and increasing access to assistive and universally designed technologies. By the Senate finally naming conferees for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act earlier this month, and by seeking passage of the Assistive Technology Act of 2004 today, we are helping the President fulfill America's promise of “tearing down the barriers to equality that face many of the 54 million Americans with disabilities.”

One quarter of the President's New Freedom Initiative focuses on technology, and the technology objective is comprised of two key components.

The first is to expand Federal investment in assistive technology research and development by increasing the budgets of the Rehabilitative Engineering Research Centers' for assistive technologies, creating a new fund to help bring assistive technologies to market, and better coordinate the Federal effort in prioritizing immediate assistive and universally designed technology needs in the disability community.

The second is to enhance access to assistive technology by reducing costs associated with purchasing assistive technology and funding for low-interest loan programs to purchase assistive technologies.

The Assistive Technology Act of 2004 before us today is designed to strengthen and build upon these two components. Our efforts focus on enhancing access to technology, reducing the costs associated with purchasing such devices, and increasing technical assistance to entities that serve students with disabilities that receive transition services, adults with disabilities maintaining or transitioning to community living and to employers. Specifically, we accomplish these goals by: reducing bureaucracy; fostering private/public sector relationships; and coordinating Federal initiatives.

Current law focuses on system change activities, and providing information and referral services to people with disabilities and their families. Systems change efforts and information and referral services are important, as people are being born with or acquiring disabilities daily. However,

according to several Federal agencies, an individual with a disability may be considered eligible for, and could benefit from, more than 20 Federal programs that directly or indirectly provide assistive technology. Additionally, there are over 25 Federal laws on the financing of assistive technology, all of which impacts local access to such technology.

Considering the number of Federal and State laws that a person has to navigate in order to access services, how long will it take for systems change efforts to remove barriers for accessing assistive technologies for a person with a disability living in Lincoln, NH? Systems change efforts, while worthwhile, do not immediately impact and help a person with a disability obtain assistive technology that he or she may need today. Therefore, this bill modifies the current list of authorized activities by expanding the authority of the State Assistive Technology Act projects to increase the ability of persons with disabilities to experience or obtain assistive technology. Our bill provides the State projects with a tangible set of activities, yet at the same time provides State flexibility to address emerging State needs.

Under this bill, States will provide citizens with access to device loan, reutilization, and financing programs, and equipment demonstration centers by developing such programs, or collaborating with other entities in the State currently operating such programs. In public forums that were held with the disability community, we consistently heard about the abandonment of equipment by persons with disabilities simply because the purchaser did not have an opportunity to try it out or see it demonstrated prior to purchasing the device. The purpose of device loan and reutilization programs, and equipment demonstration centers is to provide individuals with disabilities the opportunity to receive proper assessments and evaluations for assistive technology, test and obtain information about various devices, and borrow devices and equipment before it is purchased. The financing programs provide access to low interest loans allowing an individual to purchase the device for him or herself or a family member, without having to wait for, rely on, or navigate through the red tape created by our bureaucratic Government systems. Each of these new requirements will help make the most of limited public resources in an environment that emphasizes consumer choice in and control of assistive technology services and funding.

Another major theme of this reauthorization is the reduction of costs associated with assistive technologies and to enhance research and development opportunities in this area. In December of 2003, we began meeting with individuals within the disability community, the State Assistive Technology Act projects, large and small