

I have come to the floor this afternoon. While the GAO decision is important, it won't even come close to addressing all of the questions that have been raised about this contract. That is because the GAO's role in this process is very limited. It can examine whether the Air Force followed the letter of the law in the selection process, but it cannot look at anything beyond that. So even if it is obvious to them that the Airbus tanker costs more, that it is less safe, or it doesn't meet the Air Force's needs, the GAO can't take any action. That is our job. That is Congress's job. We have to get answers to the questions that have been raised about this deal.

This is one of the largest contracts in our history, and it is incredibly important. Our tankers refuel planes and aircraft from every single branch of our military. As long as we control that refueling technology, we control our skies and our security, and that is extremely important to our national security. We have to make sure we are making the best decision for our taxpayers and for our servicemembers. That is Congress's responsibility.

I am especially concerned because when you compare Boeing's 767 with Airbus's A-330, the 767 is clearly a better plane. Compared to the 767, the Airbus tanker is a lot larger, it is less efficient, and it is more expensive to operate. According to the Air Force itself, the A-330—the Airbus tanker—ranked lower than the Boeing 767 in survivability, which is our ability to make sure that our warfighters who are flying those planes are safe. The Airbus tanker ranked much lower than the Boeing plane in keeping our men and women who are flying them safe.

Yet although I have asked the Air Force to explain its decision on this tanker numerous times over the last 3 months, I have been stonewalled again and again on answers. No one has explained why the Air Force would ask for a medium-sized plane and then go out and choose a much larger design which is going to cost billions of dollars more in just fuel and maintenance.

No one has explained why we would buy a plane that is so big that we are going to have to rip out and replace hundreds of runways, ramps, and hangars around the globe in order to land that plane.

No one has explained why we would not buy the safest possible airplane for our servicemembers.

Perhaps most importantly, no one can explain why we are giving a multi-billion-dollar contract to a company that has made no secret of its desire to dismantle our U.S. aerospace industry.

For years, the foreign governments that own Airbus have flooded it with illegal subsidies in order to compete with Boeing. In fact, the A-330 is a result of that subsidized system. The U.S. Trade Representative is so concerned that our Government has accused the EU of unfair trade practices before the World Trade Organization. It

makes absolutely no sense to me that we would accuse Europe of illegally subsidizing Airbus and then turn around and award it a \$35 billion contract of U.S. taxpayer money. It is especially troubling because the consequences to our national security and our economy will be huge.

A report by the nonpartisan Economic Policy Institute shows that Boeing would create at least twice as many American jobs as Airbus. In other words, we stand to lose as many as 14,000 jobs right here in the United States by sending this contract to Airbus. With those jobs that we lose, we lose the knowledge and we lose the expertise that helped us create our global military strength and has made the United States the world leader in aerospace technology. Yet no one has explained why we would let that slip away.

Not only am I very troubled that I haven't been able to get answers to these questions, but this month the Air Force gave us new reason to be concerned. About 2 weeks ago, the Defense Secretary forced out the Air Force Secretary, Michael Wynne, and its Chief of Staff, Michael Moseley, after finding systemic problems in the service that led him to have a serious lack of confidence in their leadership and in their oversight. Mr. Wynne and General Moseley blessed this Airbus contract. Clearly, we in Congress—those who represent the taxpayers of this country—need to look at this deal more closely.

Congress is entrusted by the American people with the responsibility to look out for our taxpayers and to be a check on this administration or any administration. When it is clear that the administration has gone in the wrong direction, we—Congress—have to step in. Now is one of those times. We owe it to our taxpayers and to our service men and women to make sure we buy the right plane. This contract is too important.

So I am here this afternoon on the floor of the Senate to implore my colleagues to stand with me and continue to demand that the Air Force justify this decision.

I yield the floor, and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. LAUTENBERG). Without objection, it is so ordered.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period for the transaction of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

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

VERMONT STATE HOUSING AUTHORITY

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I congratulate the Vermont State Housing Authority, VSHA, on 40 years of excellence. This organization, which came into existence with a creative spark as the first statewide housing authority in the country, continues to find new and innovative ways to use Federal housing programs to find affordable homes for Vermonters.

Reaching this milestone should bring great pride to the visionaries that created the system in 1968, including Governor Phil Hoff, and to the 40 years of staff, board members and leaders that have ensured that the statewide mission of VSHA has been carried out on a daily basis.

The VSHA executive director, Richard Williams, has been at the helm of the VSHA for more than half its lifespan, working since 1984 to expand the reach of the organization, develop and maintain properties and move people out of the cold and into their own homes. It takes a man of great conviction to accomplish what he has done, and it takes a great team to deliver on the mission he and the board created. Richard was recently quoted saying, "We are proud of what we've been able to accomplish for Vermonters over the past 40 years, but the challenges have never been greater. We're inspired and motivated by the knowledge that our services are needed more than ever."

One of VSHA's primary responsibilities is administering the Department of Housing and Urban Development's, HUD, Section 8 Voucher Program in Vermont. During the past 40 years, the VSHA has worked to increase the number of vouchers available to Vermonters in all corners of the State. This has been increasingly important as the Federal resources for the programs many of our Nation's most vulnerable populations depend upon have been shrinking and poorly prioritized. The number of low- to moderate-income Vermonters seeking affordable housing, including those with disabilities, the elderly and returning veterans, continues to climb. Fortunately for Vermonters, the VSHA is constantly recognized by HUD as one of the Nation's most well run and effective housing authorities—giving hope to those that might have lost hope in virtually every other government system.

Not only has the VSHA worked to assist people in finding affordable apartments, but they have also helped many Vermonters pursue their dreams of homeownership. It gives me great pride to say that VSHA's Homeownership program has given more than 80 low-income Vermont families the opportunity to become homeowners. This dynamic program works to improve self-sufficiency by converting Section 8

vouchers into Homeownership Vouchers. I am happy to say that the VSHA Homeownership program has enabled low-income Vermonters to build equity and wealth while increasing their civic involvement.

While providing housing for Vermonters, the VSHA has simultaneously preserved and revitalized town centers, historical buildings and a general sense of community across the State. They have done this with commendable collaboration with nonprofit organizations, the private sector and various government agencies. I have seen their work, and most importantly, I have seen the tremendous impact their programs have had on my home State and the people who call the Green Mountains their home.

I congratulate the VSHA on their outstanding achievements over the past 40 years. On behalf of the people of Vermont, I applaud everyone who has worked to make the Vermont State Housing Authority a great success.

EMERGENCY EXTENDED UNEMPLOYMENT COMPENSATION ACT

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I rise in support of H.R. 5749, Emergency Extended Unemployment Compensation Act. Earlier this month we were met with troubling news about our economy. We learned that the unemployment rate, one of the strongest indicators of our Nation's economic health, experienced the largest one month increase since 1986, from 5 percent to 5.5 percent.

In real terms, this jump in the unemployment rate means that between April and May, 49,000 more American workers lost their jobs. In 2008, our economy has lost a total of 324,000 jobs.

In my State of California, the unemployment rate is the third highest in the Nation at 6.2 percent. Some areas in California's Central Valley have unemployment rates as high as 10 to 12 percent.

Families in these communities are struggling in this economy, and with Governor Schwarzenegger's recently declared a drought emergency in the Central Valley, farmers there tell me that because of the water shortage, fewer acres will be planted this year, which will mean fewer jobs in this area of the State with already skyrocketing unemployment.

Yet in this time of economic uncertainty, when so many workers can't make ends meet because they have lost their jobs, Senate Republicans today did as they have done so many times this year on issues important to American families and said "no" to passing a stand-alone unemployment benefits extension bill.

This bill, passed with strong bipartisan support by the House, could have been sent to the President immediately so that unemployed workers who have exhausted their unemployment benefits can get additional support while they try and find a new job.

Opponents of this bill wrongly suggest that extending benefits for an additional period of time in high unemployment States creates a disincentive for unemployed workers to seek a job. This flawed logic is not only demeaning to hard-working Americans, it also ignores the reality for job seekers pounding the pavement in today's economy.

Unemployed workers are out looking for new jobs, but because of the economic downturn, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to find work. Today there are only 3.7 million existing job opportunities for 8.5 million unemployed workers.

In addition, the long-term unemployment rate is 62 percent higher than it was in January of 2001, when our country was in a recession. This means that more and more unemployed workers are running out of benefits before finding new jobs.

In California, over 50 percent of newly unemployed workers are exhausting their benefits before finding a new job.

Californians are also struggling to deal with rising fuel and food costs, making it even more difficult for the 324,000 Americans who have lost their jobs this year to provide for their families.

We learned today that the national gas price average increased yet again to \$4.08, up \$1.07 from last year.

Prices for food staples like bread and eggs are up as high as 20 percent from last year.

Food banks and soup kitchens, like the Alameda County Food Bank in California, are seeing demand for food aid grow as much as 40 percent over last year, with the increase in visits a direct result of the high unemployment rate.

Senate Democrats know that we must act now to provide additional relief to workers who have exhausted their benefits and in areas of the country with high unemployment.

This bill would immediately provide up to 13 weeks of extended unemployment benefits in every state to workers who have exhausted the 26 weeks of regular unemployment benefits.

Workers in States with higher levels of unemployment, like California, would be eligible for 26 weeks of extended benefits.

This bill will also provide an additional stimulus to the Nation's economy. Leading economists tell us that for every dollar the Federal Government spends on unemployment benefits, it adds \$1.64 to the national gross domestic product.

We know that people out of work use extended unemployment benefits to meet the essential needs of their families, to buy groceries and to pay bills. With the much-needed resources this bill provides, jobless workers will help inject money into the lagging economy.

This bill is a win for struggling families and a win for the Nation's econ-

omy, and it is unfortunate that Senate Republicans refused to work with us to consider this important legislation.

SELECT AGENT PROGRAM AND BIOSAFETY IMPROVEMENT ACT

Mr. BURR. Mr. President, I rise today in support of S. 3127, the Select Agent Program and Biosafety Improvement Act of 2008. Last week, I introduced this important legislation with my friend Senator TED KENNEDY. I thank my colleague from Massachusetts for his partnership. I enjoyed working closely with him in the 109th Congress on the Pandemic and All-Hazards Preparedness Act, which was signed into law in December 2006. He continues to be one of the great leaders in the U.S. Senate and I look forward to continuing to work with him to ensure our laws protect the American people from health threats of all kinds.

S. 3127 will enhance our Nation's biosecurity and improve the biosafety of our most secure laboratories. The bill achieves two overarching goals.

First, it reauthorizes and improves the Select Agent Program. This program was created in the 1990s to control the transfer of certain dangerous biological agents and toxins that could be used for bioterrorism. The program expanded after the anthrax attacks in 2001; however, the authorization expired at the end of September 2007.

Second, the bill evaluates and enhances the safety and oversight of high containment laboratories. These laboratories are used by scientists to study select agents and other infectious materials. Labs are categorized by their safety level. There are four levels, termed Biosafety Level, BSL, 1 through 4, with 4 being the highest level. The number of these labs has grown, both domestically and internationally, in the last several years. Recent incidents in which laboratory workers were exposed to disease agents have highlighted the need to evaluate ways to improve the safety of these labs.

The Select Agent Program is jointly administered by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services', HHS, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, CDC, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture's, USDA, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, APHIS. The program was intended to prevent terrorism, and protect public and animal health and safety, while not hampering legitimate research. This is an obvious struggle that requires careful consideration, particularly when science is rapidly advancing around the globe.

Under the USA PATRIOT Act, it is illegal to possess "select agents" for reasons other than legitimate research. The Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Preparedness and Response Act of 2002 further required laboratories and laboratory personnel to undergo background checks by the FBI prior to approval for possession of select