

This bill would expand emergency health care for veterans in rural areas. We all talk about helping our veterans who are coming home. This helps do that, particularly in rural areas where the networks are not there. It needed special attention. It is there in the urban areas on the margin but even less in rural areas. It would increase payments for doctors who work in rural areas. It would stop payment cuts to providers, and it would give them a decent increase in reimbursement. All of this would ensure that seniors will be able to keep seeing the doctors they need to see.

I have worked for months to write a strong Medicare bill that could pass both Chambers with wide support. Tuesday's overwhelming House vote makes clear that this bill can be that bipartisan vehicle. In a sense, it is being taken up just in time, just before July 1. The House will not take up another vehicle. This is it. The House has gone home for its Fourth of July recess. There is not time left to craft a viable alternative. Even if there were, the House cannot pass it in time. The clock is ticking. This Medicare bill can be a slam dunk at the buzzer for 44 million American seniors who depend on Medicare. Let's do what is right. Let's ensure that seniors have access to doctors. Let's avert the impending payment cut to doctors, and let's pass this bipartisan Medicare bill.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas is recognized.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I have been talking to the physicians in my State who take Medicare patients, and frankly, this is a terrible way for Congress to do business. We see a 6-month patch on the physician reimbursement formula that will expire July 1, and unfortunately we are looking at what amounts to a partisan proposal here that we are basically being told to take or leave.

As all of our colleagues know, the ranking member on the Finance Committee, Senator GRASSLEY, got together with Senator BAUCUS after cloture was denied previously and pretty well had things worked out in a bipartisan way until the House passed their version, and then, of course, those negotiations broke down, leading us to this cloture vote we are going to have here in just a few minutes. But I have to say that in 1996 when Congress passed the Balanced Budget Act and contemplated these Draconian cuts in the physician reimbursement payments, Congress should have known and should have told the truth that it never intended that any of those cuts would ever take place—and for good reason they should never take place, because even under the current Medicare reimbursement rates, doctors—for example, in Travis County where Austin, TX, is located, only about 18 percent of the physicians in that county will actually take new Medicare patients because the reimbursement rates are already so low.

Then we have this unbelievably bad way of doing business. I don't know anybody else who could get away with—other than the Congress—passing temporary patches on the reimbursements that are paid to physicians. They last for a year, they last for 6 months, such as this last one that leads us up to the edge of a cliff here on July 1, and then we are told by the distinguished chairman of the Finance Committee that we have to take it or leave it or the cuts will occur. Well, frankly, no one believes the cuts will actually occur because Congress will act.

I suggest that rather than this terrible way of doing business that nobody else could ever get by with and rather than frightening the Medicare beneficiaries who need access to the doctors who are paid using this Medicare reimbursement formula, we ought to scrap the entire method of reimbursing doctors for Medicare and start over again, recognizing that we are not going to allow these Draconian cuts to occur, this 10-percent-plus cut that goes into effect July 1 and the 20-percent-plus cut that will occur 18 months from now. I think we ought to acknowledge that we are not going to let those cuts go into effect and scrap the sustainable growth rate formula by which those Medicare reimbursements are calculated because it is just not honest. It is not honest. It is scaring not only the Medicare beneficiaries, it is impairing access to health care for those to whom we promised the Medicare Program would actually work.

So I don't know what is going to happen on this vote on cloture. I suspect cloture may not be invoked. My hope is that there would be a bipartisan way to find our way forward. I believe it already exists in the form of a negotiation that Senator GRASSLEY and Senator BAUCUS have undertaken here in the Senate and that we shouldn't use this kind of brinkmanship to scare not only the Medicare beneficiaries—the seniors who depend on this health care—but also the physicians who are reimbursed under this formula.

GASOLINE PRICES

Mr. CORNYN. I wish to talk just a minute about gasoline prices. I don't know of any subject I hear more about and more concern about from my constituents in Texas than high gasoline prices, whether it is parents driving their children to school or their after-school activities or truckers who have to buy diesel, which is breaking the bank and which they are finding it harder and harder to pay for, or whether it is the airlines—Continental Airlines and American Airlines and Southwest Airlines, all three of which are located in the State of Texas. The price of aviation fuel made from petroleum products is making it almost impossible for them to do business under their current model, and prices are going up. It is becoming harder and harder for consumers to deal with.

There is a way Congress could act to help bring down prices at the pump on a temporary basis, and it involves exploring for and producing more American energy. That is important from a number of perspectives.

First of all, it is important from a national security perspective because right now we depend on 60 percent of our energy needs, our oil and gas needs, from foreign sources. What would happen if something were to occur that were to blockade the tankers that would prevent that oil from being transported? Well, it would mean in Iraq and Afghanistan that the Department of Defense vehicles owned by the Army, Marines, and others wouldn't have the petroleum products they need in order to function. It would exact a crippling blow against our economy. So why in the world would we continue to allow 60 percent of our dependency for oil to come from foreign sources when we have here in America enough oil under our own Outer Continental Shelf, in the oil shale in the West, and in the Arctic that could produce as much as 3 million additional barrels of oil a day? That is more than 10 percent of our current use here in the United States. As a matter of fact, it is a substantial amount—more than 10 percent, closer to 12 percent of what we use right here in the United States.

We know the money we are paying—\$135 a barrel—is enriching people such as Hugo Chavez of Venezuela, and he is using that money to buy weapons from Russia and to arm himself as he continues to take in and protect the FARC, a narcoterrorist organization, to the detriment of our friends in Colombia and stability in South America.

But it is absolutely crazy for this Congress to have in place, as it does—and it has since 1981 or 1982—a moratorium or ban on developing more of our own natural resources and becoming more self-reliant rather than more dependent on foreign sources of oil. It is up to Congress to get out of the way and to allow America to become more energy self-sufficient. We can do it, and only Congress can get that done. It is completely inexcusable when gasoline is at \$4 a gallon on average to do that, to be the impediment, to be the blockade, to be the cause of so much pain at the pump and so much sacrifice and hardship among hard-working American families.

We understand it is more than just a matter of producing oil, but that is a first and necessary step because we know when it comes to transportation fuel, we depend upon petroleum products right now to get that job done.

But we also know we need to be more fuel efficient and we need to conserve. Indeed, that is one area where Congress has acted by passing corporate fuel efficiency standards for our cars. But we know that is a long-term effort because the average age of a car in America—of the 250 million cars in America—is about 9 years. So let's assume that, in 2010, everybody started buying a new

car. It would take a long time, an average of 9 years, before that entire fleet of cars would be replaced with these new more fuel-efficient cars. So that is a long-term solution but a necessary and important one for us to take.

We also need to make sure we use good old-fashioned American ingenuity and technology to help us as we transition from this petroleum dependence we have now. It is not going to happen overnight. But for our friends who say that if we started pumping oil out of ANWR or the Outer Continental Shelf or from the oil shale in the West today, it would be years before that oil would get online. Unfortunately, that is where we put ourselves, as a result of the irrational moratoria on the development of American natural resources. It is going to take some time to transition into greater energy independence.

But for those of us who are concerned about the environment, we know we are going to have to continue to look for cleaner ways to drive and to fly and in terms of our energy needs. That is why it is so important that we use good old-fashioned American ingenuity and technology to help us find a way—development of things such as plug-in hybrid cars that can be plugged in and would charge a battery that could drive 40 miles or so before it would need to be recharged. That would help a lot of people who would only need such a vehicle, with a plug-in, to avoid petroleum products altogether. Then we would need to worry about the electricity, which is another story altogether.

There are some who have said that abusive speculation in the commodities futures markets is the cause of the problem. That is something we need to look at very closely. As a matter of fact, today, a number of us—43 Senators—have introduced legislation that we believe will create greater transparency and will finance more “cops on the beat,” so to speak, when it comes to the commodity futures market, to make sure that doesn’t contribute to the reason for prices going through the roof.

So we need to produce more energy right here at home so we don’t have to depend so much on those who wish us harm or those who would use the money from oil to buy weapons to kill us or our troops in Iraq or Afghanistan or elsewhere—or in the case of Iran, which we know is supplying troops and training to special forces in Iraq and Afghanistan and has threatened and, in some cases, is responsible for killing troops. We find ourselves dependent, in part, on countries such as Iran for the very oil we use to refine into gasoline to drive our cars. Does that make sense to anybody? It doesn’t make any sense to me.

I think what we need to do is produce more and use less oil as we transition into a cleaner, more independent energy economy. It would be better for our national security, better for our economy, and it will actually help us

control prices so hard-working American families will not be spending all the money they may have, which they would like to spend on other things, or which they need to spend on other things but cannot because of the increases in the high price of gasoline and oil, and they have to spend on those.

In conclusion—and I see the Senator from Utah, my friend, Mr. HATCH, who wishes to speak—if we will not do this when gasoline is \$4 a gallon, will we do this when gasoline is \$5 a gallon? If we will not do it when oil is \$135 a barrel, will we do it when oil is \$150 a barrel, or even higher?

The solution is not to sue OPEC to get them to open the spigot even wider to increase our dependency on foreign oil. The solution is not to raise taxes, which we know will reduce American production, while allowing foreign oil sources, such as Saudi Arabia, Venezuela, and Iran, to continue to operate without those taxes. The solution is not to increase taxes and costs on the consumer, who is already paying too much. We have it within our power to do something that will actually help the American people when it comes to the thing that most of them care a lot about today and that is the high price of gasoline.

Congress is the problem. It is high time our friends on the other side of the aisle, who control the agenda because they are in the majority, work with us to bring realistic solutions to this problem. We can do it but not if people play partisan games and refuse to cooperate on something that causes a lot of hardship to the average American family.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Utah is recognized.

TAX EXTENDERS

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, I rise to discuss a very important issue. First, I compliment the Senator from Texas. I agree with virtually everything he said. There are so many things we need to do around here, and we are not doing them.

I will discuss an issue that each day becomes more troubling to me and also to many businesses and individuals in my home State of Utah—and I am sure yours as well—the fact that this Congress has not yet acted to extend the tax provisions that expired at the end of last year and those that are set to expire at the end of 2008. This failure to act is rapidly reaching a state of crisis in some industries, and our continuing inability to take care of this basic problem only reinforces the public’s low opinion of this institution.

I believe that every member of this Senate recognizes the importance of the expired and expiring tax provisions. While there may be some items on the growing list of extenders that do not enjoy universal support, there are clearly plenty of votes to easily provide a majority or even a super-major-

ity to pass them all, if it were not for the divisive question of offsetting the revenue loss.

The list includes some important items for individuals and businesses in every State. For families, there is the election to deduct State and local sales taxes, the deduction for higher education expenses, and the deduction for the out-of-pocket expenses of school teachers.

For businesses, expired or expiring provisions include those allowing faster depreciation write-offs for retail stores, restaurants, and other investment properties, a variety of important incentives that address our energy crisis, and the vital research credit, which I have championed here for many years.

The expiration of the energy provisions and the research credit are particularly troubling, for they signal the loss of economic growth and jobs at the worst possible time. As with many of my colleagues and their constituents, I have Utahns telling me that important research and energy-related projects are going to be cancelled if these provisions are not quickly extended.

Well, here we have a group of tax provisions that enjoys wide bipartisan support, and an economy that really needs to have access to these provisions at a time of slowdown and job loss. Many of my constituents do not get it. They are asking, why can’t Congress just get it done? What is the problem?

The problem is, as we all recognize, that my colleagues on the other side insist on attaching to the bill tax-raising measures in order to offset the revenue loss of the expiring provisions. And most Senators on my side of the aisle believe that tax increases are unnecessary and, in fact, ill-advised and harmful to our economy, both today and in the future. Unfortunately, we appear to have reached an impasse on this point.

Contrary to what some proponents of offsets are saying about Republican motives in this matter, our stance is not about trying to protect a few wealthy hedge fund managers who are parking billions of dollars offshore in deferred compensation. Rather, we believe that this debate is about America’s future prosperity.

Democrats are saying that in order to be fiscally responsible, taxes need to go up to pay for the loss in revenue from keeping these tax provisions in place. Their so-called “pay-as-you-go” or “pay-go,” rules call for all revenue losses to be matched with revenue increases, or spending decreases, from somewhere else. Forget spending decreases; it just means tax increases.

In theory, this sounds pretty good, and quite responsible. I am a strong believer in being fiscally responsible, and I am as loathe to pass on our huge national debt to our children as anyone in the history of the Congress.

The problem is that to most Democrats, the word PAYGO is nothing