have health insurance. Most are middle class, well educated, and own their homes.

They just cannot keep up with the alarming rise in out-of-pocket costs associated with medical care.

It is time for reform.

Our current health care system is rampant with bureaucracy, inefficiency and waste.

An example of this is the amount of time physicians must spend filling out various forms required by insurance plans.

A national survey of physician practices found that, on average, doctors are spending 3 hours per week—the equivalent of 3 workweeks per year just on administrative tasks required by health plans.

The study showed that the cost of interacting with insurance plans amounts to $31 billion annually and approximately 7 percent of all U.S. expenditures for physician and clinical services.

More importantly, on a personal level, this is 3 weeks less time annually that physicians have to spend with their patients discussing their treatment options, explaining the pros and cons of various procedures, learning the fears and anxieties of their patients, furthering the patient-doctor relationship.

It is time for reform.

We have attempted to reform our health care system several times in the past to no avail. But this year it is different.

This time, the call for reform is coming from people and organizations that previously opposed reform.

This time, because of the reasons I have mentioned, businesses, along with unions that represent their workers, are asking for reform.

This time, patient advocacy organizations and provider groups are calling for health reform.

Make no mistake, reforming health care is not an easy task, and it is one that will require true compromise from everyone across the ideological spectrum.

But it is a task that must be done.

Our country, and the health of its citizens as well as the economy, cannot afford to maintain the status quo.

Next week, the members of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and the Senate Finance Committee will begin deliberations on legislation to reform health care.

As the members of these committees gather to discuss and ultimately mark up legislation, I want to take this opportunity to again voice my support for a public option in a menu of insurance options from which people may choose.

I believe a public option is imperative in providing a true choice for all Americans.

Let me stress: this would be a purely voluntary option.

If you like your current plan, you keep it.

But there are too many Americans who do not have real choices when it comes to health insurance, especially those who live in rural areas.

In addition, many large urban areas are dominated by one or two insurers that serve more than 60 percent of the market. In fact, there are seven states where one insurer has over 75 percent of the market share.

A public option can help Americans expand their choice of an insurance provider.

A public option could take various forms, and I think the committees are the proper place to determine the appropriate contours of a public option.

But I want to point out again that right now, today, there are more than 30 State governments that offer their employees a choice between traditional private insurance and a plan that is self-insured by the State. Some States have had them for more than 15 years.

In these 30 States, the market share of the self-funded plans within the market for State employees typically ranges from 25 to 40 percent. This shows a healthy competition between the public option and private insurers, not domination by either type of insurer.

And I want to point out that these arrangements do not seem to be a problem or incite ideological issues at the State level.

Why then, should it be so when discussing health reform on a national level?

A public option can go a long way in bringing more innovation to the delivery system and introducing new measures to reduce cost and improve quality.

A public option can serve as a benchmark for all insurers, setting a standard for cost, quality and access within regional or national marketplaces.

It can have low administrative costs and can have a broad choice of providers. It can give Americans a better range of choices, make the health care market more competitive, and keep insurance companies honest.

And again, the key to all this is that a public option will be just that, an option, not a requirement.

Some people will choose it; others will not. If you like the insurance plan you have now, you keep it.

If you are happy with the insurance you get with your employer, or even the individual insurance market, you stay enrolled in that insurance plan. And if you are unsatisfied with the public option, you have the option to switch back to private insurers.

Americans firmly support the ability to choose their own doctor and value their relationships with their providers. So do I. It is key to any health care plan that Americans have a right to choose their doctor.

An overriding goal of health reform is to increase a patient's access to affordable, quality health care—offering a public option can help increase Americans' choices.

Mr. President, it is time for reform that protects what works and fixes what is broken.

It is time to reform health care so that American businesses can afford to offer health care to their employees.

It is time to reform health care so that all Americans have access to quality, affordable care, regardless of preexisting medical conditions.

It is time to reform health care so that physicians and other providers have less redtape to deal with and more time to spend with patients.

It is time to reform health care so we place a higher priority on prevention and wellness, saving lives as well as money.

It is time to reform health care so all Americans can compare the costs and benefits of different health insurance policies.

And, it is time to reform health care so Americans have more choices and can retain the right to choose their own doctors.

For all these reasons and more, it is time for health care reform.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. MERKLEY). The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent for the quorum call to be rescinded.

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

SMALL NUCLEAR REACTORS

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I would like to report a tremendous historic development in the ability of our country to have clean air, an effective way to deal with climate change, and enough low-cost, reliable electricity to help keep jobs in this country. Yesterday I attended a press conference from a company, Babcock & Wilcox. Also included was the Tennessee Valley Authority. The company and TVA announced that Babcock & Wilcox will soon make an application to the Nuclear Regulatory Commission for permission to start building and selling a small nuclear reactor that can be built in a factory, shipped by railway to a site, and put together like Lego blocks at the site. The nuclear reactor is a 125-megawatt reactor. That compares with the large nuclear plants, of which we have 104 today in the United States. Those plants produce, on average, 1,000 megawatts of electricity. This would be 125. So the real prospect exists that we will be able to have, in this country, nuclear reactors for electricity that might cost as little as one-tenth as much to build, can be built in 3 years instead of 6, and will produce, as I said, 125 megawatts instead of 1,000—making it easier to integrate them into our electric grid—and can be built in a factory and shipped to a customer.

The reason I am excited about this prospect is it has a real chance of happening. No one has built more small reactors in the world than Babcock & Wilcox, and the Tennessee Valley Authority is the largest public utility in the United States and the only utility in the United States that is currently building a nuclear powerplant.

Republicans and, I am sure, many Democrats, but certainly Republicans in the Senate and the House, unanimously believe our goal as a country ought to be to build 100 new large nuclear powerplants over the next 20 years, while we figure out renewable electricity. The reason we want to do that is we want to deal with climate change. We want clean air, but we want to be able to keep jobs here at the same time. If climate change is the inconvenient problem, nuclear power is the inconvenient solution.

Why is that? Climate change is caused by carbon that comes from coal plants and from a variety of other sources. Forty percent of the carbon that is produced in the United States comes from coal-fired powerplants. But if we are looking for a way to produce electricity in a way that is pollution free and carbon free, 70 percent of all the pollution-free, carbon-free electricity we have today comes from our nuclear plants. Six percent of our clean electricity comes from the Sun, the wind, and the Earth.

One day it may be that we are able to make more of our electricity from the Sun, the wind, and the Earth. But at the moment, not much is available. It is expensive and the Sun is only available when the Sun shines and the wind is only available when the wind blows. If you are wanting to operate your computer, or manufacture an automobile in Illinois or Tennessee, or turn on your light at night, you don't want to have to pray that the wind is blowing or that the Sun is shining. You want reliable, low-cost electricity.

In Tennessee, we are excited about the prospect of, one day, solar energy making a bigger difference in our electrical grid. In fact, two big new plants have moved into our State to make polysilicon, which is the product that goes into the solar cells that go on the top of your house. Each of those plants uses 120 megawatts of electricity. Where will they get that electricity? One reason they are in Tennessee is because the TVA supplies a lot of low-cost, reliable electricity. That comes from coal and nuclear power and a little bit from natural gas in our State. That is pretty much the way it is around the country. Solar power is not yet low-cost, reliable electricity. You can't run the plant making the solar energy products on solar power or wind power today. One day we may, but in the meantime, while we are trying to rebuild the auto industry in Michigan and Illinois and Wisconsin and Tennessee, we want low-cost, reliable electricity. We want our Alcoa plant to stay open in Blount County, in Maryville, where I am from in Tennessee. Why is it closed? The cost of the electricity. What will open it? A 20-year contract on low-cost, reliable electricity. If we say to the Alcoa plant: We will sell you a lot of wind power, they will say: But the wind doesn't blow in our area. If we say: We will sell you solar power, they will say: It is four times as much and we might like to operate a night shift and you can't store it.

But what we will be able to say, in light of this new development we heard about yesterday—we can say to the Alcoa plant, we can say it to Eastman Chemical in Kingsport, we can say it to the two plants making materials for solar cells: We can move in a 125-megawatt nuclear reactor, put it near your site, and supply all the low-cost, reliable electricity you need.

Another use for this new reactor could be to help us clean up our coal plants. We have a clean air problem in Tennessee, as does much of America. I am very much hopeful the Environmental Protection Agency or the Congress or some combination will reinstate the CAIR rule to deal with nitrogen and sulfur and mercury, for our health in this country.

The small reactor might be used as a substitute for coal plants. Some of the coal plants we have in the TVA system and around the country are very old and very dirty. The newest ones are much more efficient and a lot cleaner. It might make sense to take the nuclear reactor, the small one, and put two of them together where an existing coal plant is. There are a lot of possibilities for this. Instead of 100 nuclear plants in 20 years, we may have another option. We may be able to have 400 or 500 small nuclear reactors in 20 years. They may be 125 megawatts here or two together or three together.

My fellow Tennessean, Al Gore, who won the Nobel Prize for his campaign on the dangers of global warming, has a line he often uses about nuclear power. ''Nuclear power may have a role to play,'' Al says, ''but unfortunately, nuclear reactors come only in one size—extra large.''

Until yesterday, you couldn't disagree with the former Vice President. Ever since President Eisenhower beached a 65-megawatt Navy submarine reactor at Shippingport, PA, in 1967, under the Atoms for Peace Program, we have been building reactors bigger and bigger. Most of the ones on the drawing board today, as I mentioned, are at least 1,200 megawatts. I believe we have 17 applications now for new nuclear powerplants. Also, one is being built right now and that is completing an old plant at Watts Bar.

We have not built a traditional large nuclear power plant from start to finish in the last 30 years in the United States. That is quite an irony. We invented the technology. We have used it successfully since the 1950s and without incident in our nuclear Navy. Twenty percent of our electricity comes from our older plants, the ones we built more than 30 years ago. They produce 20 percent of our electricity today and 70 percent of our clean electricity. But for 30 years we have not been building them.

In the meantime, France—that we don't usually like to emulate—has. France is 80 percent nuclear, and they have among the lowest carbon emissions—that contribute to global warming—in the European Union and among the lowest electric rates in the European Union. They are even selling electricity to Germany, which has invested money in solar energy and windmills and stopped nuclear but has found they do not have enough electricity to keep their jobs.

India and China, with our help, are building nuclear powerplants because they want clean, reliable electricity at a low cost.

We have appropriated money to help do that and sign treaties to help do that. Now even our President said the other day that Iran has a right to build nuclear powerplants. Well, if Iran has a right to do it, why don't we do it? We invented it. We are the ones who want low-cost, clean electricity. Let's go ahead and do it. So it will be 20 years, but it takes a long time to get one of those projects through the Nuclear Regulatory Commission. I mentioned there were 17 applications. It takes another 5 or 6 years after you get through the 2- or 3-year process at the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to build these big plants. So that is a long ways.

If you are a utility and all you really need is 300 new megawatts to meet growing demand, this new, more flexible approach—this smaller reactor—is going to lower costs and open the door to more widespread use of nuclear power. It will help us achieve the goal of building 100 new nuclear powerplants in the next 20 years in order to deal with climate change.

To those who are still skeptical of nuclear power, we must say, if global warming is an inconvenient problem, then nuclear power is the inconvenient solution.

Babcock & Wilcox and TVA have shown us this new approach. They have proposed a reactor that can be built in a factory in 3 years, shipped to the site on rails, and fit together like Lego blocks. That is a very original idea. The larger reactors are still going to be necessary. We are going to need the power. But as B&W and the TVA have reminded us, there is more than one way to skin a cat. What we are seeing here today is what the business schools call a disruptive technology. I hope the public and the press will appreciate how the Tennessee Valley Authority is fulfilling its mission as a public utility by taking such a progressive stance on technology.

America's nuclear technology has been falling behind. Of that, there is no doubt. The French, the Japanese, and the Russians are all selling reactors out in the world, to India and China

and other places. This is going to make them sit up and take notice because the concept we saw yesterday is perfect for developing nations that do not have the infrastructure to handle the larger reactors. It is perfect for small towns and factories all over America that may need only 125 megawatts and cannot afford something larger. It is what is called ''distributed generation''—producing electricity onsite instead of wheeling it from deserts or mountaintops hundreds or thousands of miles away. As the old saying goes, ''Small is beautiful.''

One of the things we are going to have to face as we think about what kind of electricity we want for the future is the landscape of America. You know, landscape is a part of our environment as well, and the landscape becomes a real concern. When we look at the energy sprawl that could be created by some of the renewable energy projects, it takes a lot of space to produce a little bit of electricity.

For example, a big nuclear plant can be located on about 1 square mile. That is one that produces 1,000 megawatts. To get that much electricity from biomass, which means woodchips or dead trees, you would need a forest the size of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park—that is 550,000 acres—and the number of trucks that would be coming in and out to haul the stuff in and back out would be in the hundreds every day. You would be talking about millions of tons of woodchips and dead trees a year. So that is for just one big nuclear plant equivalent of electricity. On the other hand, to create the same amount of electricity from wind turbines that you would get from one nuclear plant, you would have to cover about 270 square miles.

In our part of the world, in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains, we do not really want to see these 50-story towers with blades that are as long as football fields, with flashing lights on top that can be seen for 20 miles. We do not want to see them along the foothills of the Smokies, and I doubt the people of Virginia want to see them along the Blue Ridge Parkway, and I doubt they want to see them in Pennsylvania or in the White Mountains. And in the Eastern United States, they only work on the ridgetops, and they do not work very well. That is why there is only one wind farm in the entire Southeastern United States. It is in Tennessee and only operates 18 percent of the time, and part of that time is at night when we have a lot of extra electricity. So that does not work very well.

The Senator from California, Mrs. FEINSTEIN, with whom I work on the Appropriations Interior Subcommittee, has expressed her concern about the size of the solar thermal plants proposed for the Mojave Desert, which she has tried to protect for years. They would have to be 5 miles on each side in order to get a decent amount of electricity, and that is only during the daytime.

You have the wind and you have the Sun, but you still need either the coal plant or the nuclear plant. So I believe there is a place for wind: far offshore, the middle of Lake Michigan, or in parts of the wind corridor. I believe there is a great future for solar because solar power comes during the peak times, during the day when we can use it. Perhaps we can use our rooftops to provide the space. So we think that is more promising for our area. I think biomass is useful, but I have already expressed how large an area it would take to produce a little electricity. And we might be able to get a few hundred megawatts out of the Mississippi River by putting turbines in the water.

So how are we going to reindustrialize America over the next 25 years? How are we going to keep those auto suppliers and assembly plants and aluminum plants and even the new plants making solar in our country if we have sky-high costs of unreliable electricity? We need another option.

While we are cleaning up the coal plants, while we are figuring out renewable electricity, we now have another way to skin the cat; that is, the small nuclear reactor, 125 megawatts. That is about the size of electricity that is produced by Fort Loudoun Dam in our State. It is significant, but it is a lot smaller than the big ones we are used to.

What I really hope is that when Americans see this user-friendly reactor sitting underground—that is another aspect: A lot of it, including the storage of the waste, goes underground. Another aspect is it is only two stories tall. Most people think nuclear plants, the big ones—they see these big cooling towers. That is to cool the water that has to be used. But these small ones are air-cooled, so they don't use much water. That is a great advantage. And they are not an eyesore, they are two stories tall. I mean, remember, the wind turbines are 50-stories tall, producing almost no electricity in a consistent way. The nuclear reactor is producing low-cost energy 90 percent of the time, and it is two stories tall.

So I think with this development people may begin to rethink nuclear power. It is already happening out there. People are recognizing that the dangers of nuclear have been widely exaggerated, there is nothing to be fearful about, and once we realize that, we are going to see nuclear power for what it is: an appropriate technology that will enable us to meet our future energy needs without overwhelming the world with pollution and warming the planet.

So I hope my colleagues in the Senate will join me in saying congratulations to Babcock & Wilcox and especially to the Tennessee Valley Authority for leading the country in this renaissance of nuclear energy. Congratulations, good luck, and I hope there are many of these projects on the drawing boards.

This is the way for us to clean the air, deal with global warming, and at the same time have low-cost, reliable electricity in large amounts so that we can keep our jobs here.

There is one other aspect to this that I ought to mention. As we talk about the different forms of energy, people worry that so much of what it takes to build the wind turbines or the solar plants or even the large nuclear plants, and how they may be manufactured overseas and that the jobs are there and not here. All of the jobs for the small nuclear reactors will be in the United States—virtually all of them. So this is not only American-made energy, all of the parts that go to building what I hope will be hundreds of these small reactors over time can be made and will be made right here in the United States.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that I be allowed to speak as in morning business.

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

(The remarks of Mr. THUNE pertaining to the introduction of S. 1242 are printed in today's RECORD under ''Statements on Introduced Bills and Joint Resolutions.'')

HEALTH CARE REFORM

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I wish to say I have great concern not just about the ownership interests the Federal Government already has in financial institutions and in auto companies and in insurance companies but also about what we are hearing might happen with health care.

My view is, having a government plan, a government takeover of health care would again be an intervention into the marketplace on a scale and on a level I don't think most Americans want to see. It is referred to around here as a public plan option, but let's call it what it is: It is a government plan. It is a government-run health care system. The more you have the government involved in the decisions with respect to health care, the more the government is going to dictate many of the decisions that are going to be made and traditionally are made between a patient and a physician, in consultation with each other, between a consumer and a health care provider. Those types of interactions occur today in the marketplace. If the government is imposed into that particular situation, it seems to me at least we are going to have the government making more and more decisions with respect to health care: Which treatments are going to be approved;