created in 2002, this program has helped almost 6,000 farmers and small businesses across the Nation invest in alternative energy projects. The program has generated or saved enough energy to power about 600,000 homes a year. By providing just $192 million in grants and $165 million in loan guarantees, the program has brought in $800 million in private and State investments. Plus, the Rural Energy for America Program helps create demand for new jobs in rural economies. These are jobs in installation and operations and maintenance work—good jobs that rural America needs. It also bolsters American energy independence and fosters homegrown energy sources such as wind and solar and biomass and geothermal instead of foreign oil.

Shirley Hovda's rural wood finishing and coating business, Quality Decorating, in Roseau, MN, is one of the 6,000 that benefited from the Rural Energy for America Program over the years. Roseau, in northern Minnesota, is cold in the winter and in the fall and in the early spring. When Shirley's heating bills spiked, she decided it was time to invest in a geothermal heating and cooling system to reduce costs in her newly constructed 6,000 square foot facility.

With the help of a $7,920 grant from the Rural Energy for America Program, she was able to purchase and install the geothermal system in 2008. Over the past 5 years, Shirley has seen her energy bills reduced by 40 percent, saving thousands of dollars she has invested in more productive parts of her business.

The bill we are introducing today reauthorizes the Rural Energy for America Program to continue helping farmers and small business owners such as Shirley to make smart investments in renewable energy and energy efficiency. It makes improvements to the program too. While the program has had a fantastic impact on the country's rural economy, farmers tell me they are facing challenges accessing it. So our bill removes barriers while ensuring taxpayer dollars are spent wisely.

First, our bill simplifies the application process, making it easier for farmers and small businesses to access the program's grants and loans. The new application process matches the complexity of the application to the size of the project. That way, farmers and the USDA can avoid unnecessary and costly paperwork if the project doesn't warrant it.

Second, my bill removes a regulation that currently requires farmers to use the program's funding to install a second electric meter that currently goes unread. In these tight fiscal times, I think it is important that every taxpayer dollar is well spent, so the bill will eliminate this redundancy and remove an unnecessary burden on program participants.

Third, our bill requires the USDA to include stronger health and environmental criteria when evaluating potential projects, and it expands startup support and funds for feasibility studies so that farmers and businesses can start projects with sound planning.

We are very grateful for the strong support from the agricultural community, including the National Farmers Union, the Minnesota Farmers Union, the Environmental Law and Policy Center, the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, the Agriculture Energy Association, the Distributed Wind Alliance, the Minnesota Corn Growers, and the Minnesota Soybean Growers.

With the Chair's indulgence, I have about 30 seconds left. I have an inner clock. I think I am up against my 2 minutes, so I wish to say I am proud to introduce this legislation with Senator HARKIN, who is a true champion to farmers here in the Senate. Going forward, I look forward to working with all of my colleagues from both sides of the aisle to pass this reauthorization as part of the farm bill.

I see Senator JOHANNS, the former Secretary of Agriculture, on the floor, whom I hope to work with on this legislation.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the text of the bill be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the text of the bill was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

S. 2225

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

SECTION 1. RURAL ENERGY FOR AMERICA PROGRAM.

Section 9007 of the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (7 U.S.C. 8107) is amended—

(1) in subsection (b)(2)—

(A) in subparagraph (C), by striking ''and'' at the end;

(B) by redesignating subparagraph (D) as subparagraph (E); and

(C) by inserting after subparagraph (C) the following:

''(D) a nonprofit organization; and'';

(2) in subsection (c)—

(A) by striking paragraph (1) and inserting the following:

''(1) LOAN GUARANTEE AND GRANT PROGRAM.—

''(A) IN GENERAL.—In addition to any similar authority, the Secretary shall provide loan guarantees and grants to agricultural producers and rural small businesses—

''(i) to purchase renewable energy systems, including—

''(I) systems that may be used to produce and sell electricity, such as for agricultural or residential purposes; and

''(II) unique components of renewable energy systems; and

''(ii) to make energy efficiency improvements.

''(B) TIERED APPLICATION PROCESS.—

''(i) IN GENERAL.—In providing loan guarantees and grants under this subsection, the Secretary shall use a 3-tiered application process that reflects the sizes of proposed projects in accordance with this subparagraph.

''(ii) TIER 1.—The Secretary shall establish a separate application process for projects for which the cost of the activity funded under this subsection is not more than $80,000.

''(iii) TIER 2.—The Secretary shall establish a separate application process for projects for which the cost of the activity funded under this subsection is greater than $80,000 but less than $200,000.

''(iv) TIER 3.—The Secretary shall establish a separate application process for projects for which the cost of the activity funded under this subsection is equal to or greater than $200,000.

''(v) APPLICATION PROCESS.—The Secretary shall establish an application, evaluation, and oversight process that is most simplified for tier I projects and more comprehensive for each subsequent tier.'';

(B) in paragraph (2)—

(i) in subparagraph (C), by inserting ''and public health'' before ''benefits''; and

(ii) by striking paragraph (F) and inserting the following:

''(F) the natural resource conservation benefits of the renewable energy system; and'';

(C) in paragraph (3)—

(i) in subparagraph (A), by inserting ''in an amount not to exceed $100,000 per grant'' after ''in the form of grants''; and

(ii) by striking subparagraph (C);

(D) in paragraph (4)(C), by striking ''75 percent of the cost'' and inserting ''all eligible costs''; and

(E) by adding at the end the following:

''(5) REQUIREMENT.—In carrying out this section, the Secretary shall not require a second meter for on-farm residential portions of rural projects connected to the grid.'';

(3) in subsection (f)—

(A) by striking ''Not later'' and inserting the following:

''(1) IN GENERAL.—Not later''; and

(B) by adding at the end the following:

''(2) SUBSEQUENT REPORT.—Not later than 4 years after the date of enactment of this paragraph, the Secretary shall submit to Congress a report on activities carried out under this section, including the outcomes achieved by projects funded under this section.''; and

(4) in subsection (g)—

(A) in paragraph (1)(D), by striking ''for fiscal year 2012'' and inserting ''for each of fiscal years 2012 through 2017''; and

(B) in paragraph (3)—

(i) by striking ''this section $25,000,000'' and inserting ''this section—

''(A) $25,000,000'';

(ii) by striking the period at the end and inserting a ''; and''; and

(iii) by adding at the end the following:

''(B) $100,000,000 for each of fiscal years 2013 through 2017.''.

By Mr. CARDIN (for himself, Mrs. BOXER, Mr. DURBIN, Mrs. GILLIBRAND, Mr. HARKIN, Ms. LANDRIEU, Mr. LAUTENBERG, Mr. MENENDEZ, and Ms. MIKULSKI):

S.J. Res. 39. A joint resolution removing the deadline for the ratification of the equal rights amendment, to the Committee on the Judiciary.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, today I am introducing a joint resolution which would remove the deadline for the states' ratification of the equal rights amendment, ERA. I thank Senators BOXER, DURBIN, GILLIBRAND, HARKIN, LANDRIEU, LAUTENBERG, MENENDEZ, and MIKULSKI for joining me as original cosponsors.

When Congress passed the ERA in 1972, it provided that the measure had to be ratified by ¾ of the States, 38 States, within 7 years. This deadline was later extended to 10 years by a joint resolution enacted by Congress,

but ultimately only 35 out of 38 States had ratified the ERA when the deadline expired in 1982.

Congress can and should give the States another chance. In 1992, the 27th Amendment to the Constitution prohibiting immediate Congressional pay raises was ratified after 203 years. Article V of the Constitution contains no time limits for ratification of constitutional amendments, and the ERA time limit was contained in a joint resolution, not the actual text of the amendment.

The Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution requires ''equal protection of the laws,'' and the Supreme Court has so far held that most sex or gender classifications are subject to only ''intermediate scrutiny'' when analyzing laws that may have a discriminatory impact. In 2011 Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia gave an interview in which he stated that ''certainly the Constitution does not require discrimination on the basis of sex. The only issue is whether it prohibits it. It doesn't.'' Ratification of the ERA by state legislatures would provide the courts with clearer guidance in holding gender or sex classifications to the ''strict scrutiny'' standard.

The ERA is a simple and straightforward constitutional amendment. It reads: ''Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex.'' The amendment gives power to Congress to enforce its provisions by appropriate legislation, and the amendment would take effect two years after ratification by the States.

March is Women's History Month. And today is the 40th anniversary of passage by the Senate of the joint resolution to extend the ERA ratification timeline on March 22, 1972. Today, nearly half of the States have a version of the ERA written into their State constitution. My own State of Maryland's constitution reads that ''Equality of rights under the law shall not be abridged or denied because of sex.''

I am therefore pleased to introduce this joint resolution today, which is endorsed by a wide variety of groups, including United 4 Equality, the National Council of Women's Organizations, the National Organization for Women, and the American Association of University Women. I urge my colleagues to support this joint resolution.

SUBMITTED RESOLUTIONS

SENATE RESOLUTION 404—RECOGNIZING THE LIFE AND WORK OF WAR CORRESPONDENT MARIE COLVIN AND OTHER COURAGEOUS JOURNALISTS IN WAR ZONES

Mr. WHITEHOUSE (for himself, Mr. SCHUMER, Mrs. GILLIBRAND, and Mr. WYDEN) submitted the following resolution; which was considered and agreed to:

S. RES. 404

Whereas The Sunday Times reporter Marie Colvin was killed during the shelling of a makeshift media center in the Baba Amr neighborhood of the besieged Syrian city of Homs on February 22, 2012, along with French photographer Rémi Ochlik;

Whereas Ms. Colvin leaves behind a beloved family where she grew up in the State of New York, was educated and began her journalistic career in the United States, and throughout her career as one of the foremost war correspondents of her generation exemplified American values of humanity, accountability, decency, transparency, and courage;

Whereas Ms. Colvin worked with relentless bravery to report on the recent uprising in Syria and to expose crimes against humanity, human-rights violations, and the ravages of war in conflict zones throughout the world, including the Balkans, the Chechen Republic, Libya, and Sri Lanka, where she was seriously wounded and lost vision in 1 eye;

Whereas Ms. Colvin shed light on human-rights violations through her courageous reporting on how these conflicts affected the lives of individuals;

Whereas the actions of Ms. Colvin in Timor-Leste are widely credited with averting a massacre;

Whereas Ms. Colvin said, ''Covering a war means going to places torn by chaos, destruction, and death, and trying to bear witness. It means trying to find the truth in a sandstorm of propaganda when armies, tribes or terrorists clash. And yes, it means taking risks, not just for yourself but often for the people who work closely with you.'';

Whereas the work of Ms. Colvin exemplifies the best qualities of journalism;

Whereas Ms. Colvin was awarded the 2000 Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women's Media Foundation for behind-the-lines action in Kosovo and the Chechen Republic, twice named Foreign Reporter of the Year at the British Press Awards, named the Journalist of the Year by the Foreign Press Association in 2000, and named Woman Journalist of the Year by the Foreign Press Association in 2010; and

Whereas Ms. Colvin and brave journalists have lost their lives serving as the conscience of the world: Now, therefore, be it

Resolved, That the Senate—

(1) extends its sympathy to the families of Ms. Colvin and other reporters who have died reporting from conflict zones;

(2) recognizes the bravery of Ms. Colvin and other correspondents and photographers who have lost their lives while exposing the truth;

(3) calls on the world community to honor the memories of Ms. Colvin and other reporters; and

(4) calls on the government of Syria to halt the brutal attacks against the people of Syria and to respect their human rights.

SENATE RESOLUTION 405—AUTHORIZING THE TAKING OF A PHOTOGRAPH IN THE CHAMBER OF THE UNITED STATES SENATE

Mr. REID of Nevada (for himself and Mr. MCCONNELL) submitted the following resolution; which was considered and agreed to:

S. RES. 405

Resolved, That paragraph 1 of rule IV of the Rules for the Regulation of the Senate Wing of the United States Capitol and Senate Office Buildings (prohibiting the taking of pictures in the Senate Chamber) be temporarily suspended for the sole and specific purpose of permitting the Senate Photographic Studio to photograph the United States Senate in actual session on Tuesday, March 27, 2012, at the hour of 2:15 p.m.

SEC. 2. The Sergeant at Arms of the Senate is authorized and directed to make the necessary arrangements therefore, which arrangements shall provide for a minimum of disruption to Senate proceedings.

NOTICE OF INTENT TO OBJECT TO PROCEEDING

I, Senator BARBARA MIKULSKI intend to object to proceeding to S. 1789, a bill to improve, sustain, and transform the United States Postal Service, dated March 22, 2012.

NOTICE OF HEARING

COMMITTEE ON ENERGY AND NATURAL RESOURCES

Mr. BINGAMAN. Mr. President, I would like to announce for the information of the Senate and the public that a hearing has been scheduled before the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. The hearing will be held on Thursday, March 29, 2012, at 9:30 a.m., in room SD–366 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building in Washington, DC.

The purpose of the hearing is to receive testimony on current and near-term future price expectations and trends for motor gasoline and other refined petroleum fuels.

Because of the limited time available for the hearing, witnesses may testify by invitation only. However, those wishing to submit written testimony for the hearing record should send it to the Committee on Energy and Natural Resources, United States Senate, Washington, DC 20510–6150, or by email to Allison_Seyferth@energy.senate.gov.

For further information, please contact Hannah Breul at (202) 224–4756 or Allison Seyferth at (202) 224–4905.

AUTHORITY FOR COMMITTEES TO MEET

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Armed Services be authorized to meet during the session of the Senate on March 22, 2012. at 9:30 a.m.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection it is so ordered.

COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs be authorized to meet during the session of the Senate on March 22, 2012, at 9:45 a.m., to conduct a hearing entitled ''International Harmonization of Wall Street Reform: Orderly Liquidation, Derivatives, and the Volcker Rule.''