

migratory birds, that fuels our thriving outdoor economy.

Hunting and fishing are more than just hobbies in our State, I say to the Presiding Officer. They are a way of life, and they are critically important to our economy.

Every year, nearly 2 million people fish our lakes and our streams, and close to 700,000 people hunt our fields and forests.

Nationwide, the hunting and fishing industry is valued at \$95.5 billion a year, and it brings in \$14 billion in revenue. Clean water is a fundamental pillar in supporting this economic sector and protecting people against dangerous toxins such as mercury.

Minnesota has passed some of the most stringent mercury rules in the country. In 2006, our State legislature passed laws requiring our largest powerplants to cut mercury emissions 90 percent by 2015. The Federal Government is finally catching up and will publish a requirement in coming days to make similar reductions by 2016.

Yet despite everything we have done to combat mercury pollution, we are still grappling with its consequences. A recent analysis of 25 years of data has found an unexpected rise in average mercury levels in northern pike and walleye from Minnesota lakes. After declining by 37 percent from 1982 to 1992, average mercury concentrations in these fish began to increase in the mid 1990s.

During the last decade of that period, 1996 to 2006, average mercury concentrations increased 15 percent. These numbers make one of the clearest possible arguments for supporting Federal protection, because we all have a stake in protecting the health of our fish and wildlife, and we cannot do that if we cannot keep dangerous toxins out of our air and water supply.

This is important to our economy, but it is also important to maintaining a certain way of American life, a way of life that many of us grew up with that we ought to be able to pass on to future generations. I grew up in a family that valued the outdoors. I was 18 years old before I took any vacation that did not involve a tent or a camper in one way or another.

This did not just start with my parents. My grandpa was an avid hunter and fisherman. He worked 1,500 feet underground in the mines in Ely, MN. You can imagine why for him hunting was his way of life. This was his way out. When he got above ground from those mines, it was something he loved to do. I want future generations of Minnesotans to be able to enjoy these same pastimes. I want them to be able to fish in clean water, to hunt in abundant forests, and to camp out in our beautiful wilderness. But I also want them to know the same America we know, an America that is innovative, that is forward thinking, that is willing to come together and hammer out hard-won solutions to tough challenges.

Nowhere is this more important than our quest to move America forward through smarter energy and environmental policies. I cannot help but think, this is our generation's version of the space race and energy race. But the finish line will not be Neil Armstrong placing a flag on the Moon. It will be building the next generation of energy-efficient windows, and doing it in northern Minnesota instead of in China, or an electric car battery factory in Memphis, TN, instead of Mumbai, India, or a wind turbine manufacturer in San Jose, CA, instead of Sao Paulo, Brazil.

This is my vision for an energy America that is energy independent, a stronger, more innovative America. I know you all want to same thing. That is why I am here on the floor today, because I know we cannot continue to get by with piecemeal energy policy. We cannot play red light-green light with our tax incentives as we are doing this year, and that is why we have to put them in place again.

What we need now is a comprehensive national blueprint for energy policy, a solution that will serve the integrity of our air, of our water and natural resources, that gives businesses the incentives to research and develop new sources of energy that invest in the next generation of American innovation.

That is our challenge. It is not going to happen overnight, but I believe we will get it done. We have before; we will do it again. One way to start is to make sure we extend these energy tax credits.

I yield the floor.

THE PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from South Dakota.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, there is an old political axiom that is attributed to Thomas Jefferson, more recently to Gerald Ford, that says: A government that is big enough to give you everything you want is also big enough to take it all away.

Those words took on a whole new meaning this last week when we found out the Secretary of the Health and Human Services Department, Kathleen Sebelius, was issuing new regulations with regard to the health care act that passed last year that would apply to religious-affiliated universities, charities, and hospitals.

I think we have to remember exactly why it was that many of our forefathers came to this country in the first place. They came, in many cases, because they were trying to get away from religious persecution in their homelands. So they came to the United States with the desire to start anew and to assert that in this new government they formed that they would protect freedoms, basic freedoms, such as religious liberty.

So in the Declaration of Independence they said:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are [the rights to] Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.—[In order] to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

So that was a foundational principle of our democracy, and it was enshrined, when they wrote the Constitution, in the first amendment of the Bill of Rights, when they said:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .

It was the very first right they enshrined in the Bill of Rights in the Constitution of the United States. That was the weight they attached to the important issue of religious liberty, and it was consistent with the statement in the Declaration of Independence, where it says that those rights are endowed by our Creator. They are not given to us by a State. They are not given to us by government. They are something that is endowed by our Creator. The government is here to protect those rights.

So when this issue popped up on many people's radar screen—and, of course, it has been percolating out there for quite a while, but there had been an opportunity to weigh in and to provide comments, with the hope that the Department of Health and Human Services would come to the right conclusion and exempt religious-affiliated schools, hospitals, and charities—when that was not going to be the case and they were going to require these very organizations to do something that violated their consciences and violated the teachings and the practices of their faith, many people across this country—we have all heard from them—got very engaged on this issue.

It seems to me, at least, there is a very simple answer to this; that is, the administration could go back and revisit this issue and more broadly make this exemption not just for churches—which is where it is today—but also for church schools, church hospitals, church universities.

It was interesting, Tuesday morning the minority leader in the Senate, Senator McCONNELL, was out here talking about this issue, and he mentioned:

One out of six patients in America is treated at a Catholic hospital. Catholic Charities is the largest private provider of social services to poor children, families, and individuals in America. The Catholic Church runs the largest network of private schools in the country.

He goes on to say:

These institutions have thrived because they have been allowed to freely pursue their religious convictions in a country that, until now, respected their constitutional right to do so.

He went on to say in that statement:

If the rights of some are not protected, the rights of all are in danger.

I think what has many of the churches across this country and many of the

universities and many of the hospitals concerned about is that this is going to become a finalized regulation.

The proponents of the regulation are saying there is a year to comply with it. I would submit to you that asking people in this country to check their principles at the door not now but a year from now is not making any kind of an accommodation.

This needs to be reversed. This is clearly a violation of religious liberty, the protection and right we have in the first amendment of our Constitution in our Bill of Rights, and I hope the administration will do the right thing and acknowledge that they have made a mistake, that they have gone too far, that they have overreached, that they have treaded in an area they should not tread and make this right. The way to make this right is to reverse this decision.

Some have argued: What is that going to mean? Does that mean people in this country are not going to have access to contraceptive services? The answer to that is absolutely not. Contraception would be widely available. It is just that religious-affiliated employers would not be forced to fund this coverage which violates the tenants of their faith. It does not have anything to do with contraception. It does not have anything to do with that issue at all. What it has to do with is the issue of religious liberty and whether we are going to respect that or are we going to allow that to be eroded, and who knows where this goes next.

The other point I would make is, this is also, I think, an example of what happens when you get a government that is so big it can give you everything you want but also big enough to take it all away. There are a lot of people who, when this was debated, when the affordable care act was debated, argued—myself included—this would lead to government running more of our lives, making more decisions, intruding more, having more control, and making decisions with regard to people's health care.

I would submit this is an example—and perhaps example No. 1—of that very fact. What we are seeing now is, the affordable care act—as it gets implemented, we are giving more and more power to the Federal Government, and when we do that, when big government gets bigger and bigger, it has more latitude when it comes to running over the rights of ordinary Americans. This is a perfect example of that.

I could go down the list of other regulations. I have come down to the floor many times to talk about regulatory overreach, excessive regulations that go way beyond common sense, that do not deal with issues of public health and safety but are simply regulations for regulation's sake.

People have heard me come down and talk about the Department of Labor's efforts now to regulate the young people who work on family farms and

ranches and the overly proscriptive way in which they are trying to keep young people from performing duties they learned growing up that they are trained to do, that contribute to the overall success and prosperity of family farms and ranches.

The Department of Labor's proposal right now would restrict young people from working at elevations that are more than 6 feet, from working with farm animals that are more than 6 months old, from working around grain elevators or stockyards or operating certain kinds of equipment, many pieces of equipment, types of equipment that are fairly standard on a farming operation. It strikes at the very heart of what makes a family farm and ranch operation tick. It is an assault on the heartland of this country and the culture and values that have helped shape it and make it great.

So this issue of regulatory overreach and big government is an issue that I think is symbolized by this current debate. What we are having is a debate about the reach of government to where they can start coming up with regulations under the new health care law that clearly violate the religious liberty protections that are afforded for people in this country under the first amendment and which I think our Founders, if they were around today, would find incredibly offensive.

This is an affront, an assault on these very liberties. It is an assault on our Bill of Rights, our Constitution. It is something the administration should walk back from and make right. They can do that very simply by reversing this or widening or broadening this exemption to cover religious-affiliated schools, universities and charities. And they could do that right now.

I would hope that would be the case. If it is not, there is legislation that has been proposed here. A number of my colleagues have already filed bills. In fact, Senator BLUNT was down here earlier today and asked to call up an amendment that would address this issue. It was objected to on the grounds that it is not related to the underlying bill, the highway bill. Well, if it is not related to the highway bill, then let's provide an opportunity for Congress to weigh in on this. I can tell you one thing, the American people are weighing in on this. This Congress of the United States, as their representatives, needs to stand for the American people and, more importantly, needs to defend the Constitution of the United States. If the administration is going to take this step, and if the administration is not going to walk back from this, this Congress of the United States needs to be heard.

There will be numerous attempts until that opportunity is presented by my colleagues and me to make sure this wrong is fixed, is corrected, and that the religious liberties for which our Founders came to this country and for which so many have fought and died over the years to defend are pro-

tected, and those rights that are enshrined in our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution and our Bill of Rights are protected for the American people.

I yield the floor.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

OBSERVING NATIONAL INVENTORS' DAY

• Mr. BEGICH. Mr. President, today I would like to focus attention on inventors. Senate Joint Resolution 140, Public Law 97-198, designated February 11, the anniversary of the birth of the inventor Thomas Alva Edison, as National Inventors' Day.

Each year we recognize the contributions of those who use their imagination and skills to conceive, create, concoct, discover, devise, and formulate new devices, machines, and processes in order to receive patents, trademarks, and copyrights.

Inventors play an enormously important role in promoting progress in every aspect of our lives. Invention and innovation are basic to the technological and manufacturing strength of the United States and our economic, environmental, and social well-being.

The Constitution specifically provides for the granting of exclusive rights to inventors for their discoveries. During the First Congress, President George Washington prevailed upon the House and Senate to enact a patent statute and wisely advised that "there is nothing which can better deserve your patronage than the promotion of science."

In our State, since our Nation's bicentennial, over 1,600 patents have been issued to Alaska residents. The ingenuity of our citizens is reflected in the variety of patents issued such as a vehicle escape tool; an ocean spill and contaminated sea ice containment, separation, and removal system; an audible fishing weight; and a fish pin bone removal apparatus—just to name a few.

In recent years, over 500 new applications have been received by the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office from Alaskans involving wells, hydraulic and earth engineering, and electric conductors and insulators.

I applaud the efforts of support groups in Alaska such as the Inventors Institute of Alaska, Alaska Inventors and Entrepreneurs, and the Patent and Trademark Resource Center.

The genius of inventors is key to our future. The next great American invention could be among the patent applications pending at the Patent Office.

On the observance of National Inventors' Day, I urge all Alaskans to reflect on contributions of inventors and to take part in appropriate programs and activities.●