

PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, this week is National Hemp History Week, and to help celebrate I thought I would show a few Oregon-made hemp products to highlight the many uses and opportunities for industrial hemp in my State and across the country.

In the basket I brought, I have food, soap, clothes, and even deck sealant, all made in Oregon, bought and sold in American stores and used by Americans. Oregon companies such as Bob's Red Mill, Fiddlebumps, and Hemp Shield contribute to our economy in unique ways. Industrial hemp supports a \$620 million industry in America, and our companies have found innovative ways of incorporating it into everyday products.

However, the full growth potential of this industry is being cut down before it can fully bloom because a single ingredient that links all of these products—the hemp itself—cannot be grown in America. The unfortunate reality is that current Federal rules prohibit our farmers from growing industrial hemp on American soil. This means 100 percent of the hemp used in these products is imported from other nations. The Federal ban on hemp amounts, in my view, to a restriction on free enterprise, and it doesn't accomplish anything but stifles job creation and economic growth.

We are the world's largest consumers of hemp products, but we are the only major industrialized nation to ban hemp farming. This hasn't always been the case, and it doesn't have to continue to be the case. It was once a booming crop in America and it can and should be again.

American farmers were growing this product as early as the 1600s, before our Nation was even founded. The Declaration of Independence, colleagues, was written on paper made from hemp. In the 1800s and early 1900s, it was used to make rope, heating oil, and textiles. During World War II we used it as part of the Hemp for Victory Program to support our soldiers. But everything got changed when hemp got wrapped up with marijuana in Federal regulations, and it has been banned ever since. Are they related? Maybe industrial hemp and marijuana are related species, but one should not be confused with the other, much like a Chihuahua and a St. Bernard. Mixing hemp in with a ban on growing marijuana is based on a lot of misconception. No matter where Members of this body come down on medical or recreational marijuana, industrial hemp and marijuana might be related plant species, but there are big differences between them, such as their chemical makeup.

Because they are not the same plant, they should not be treated with the same regulation and prohibitions. In my view, keeping the ban on growing hemp makes about as much sense as instituting a ban on Portobello mushrooms. There is no reason to outlaw a

product that is perfectly safe because of what it is related to.

That is why the majority leader Senator McCONNELL and I came together, with our colleague from Kentucky RAND PAUL and my colleague from Oregon JEFF MERKLEY—we came together on a bipartisan basis to introduce the Industrial Hemp Farming Act. Our bill would make sure hemp does not get lumped into the definition of marijuana in the Controlled Substances Act.

Our bill is all about stopping the unfair punishment of entrepreneurs and farmers who want to be part of a growing ag industry here in America. Companies in our Nation that are importing hemp to use in food, cosmetics, soap, clothing, and auto parts, they ought to be buying that hemp from American farmers and contributing to our agricultural sector.

I will close by way of saying there are also big environmental benefits to industrial hemp. It takes less water to grow hemp than it does to grow cotton, and hemp generally requires fewer pesticides than other crops. I will put it this way, colleagues: If you can buy it at your local supermarket—and I got involved in this because I saw it at Costco when my wife was pregnant with our third child—if you can buy it at the local supermarket, American farmers ought to be able to grow it.

I urge my colleagues to join me, the distinguished majority leader Senator McCONNELL, his colleague Senator RAND PAUL, and my colleague Senator MERKLEY in our legislation to address this gap in American law and today join me in celebrating National Hemp History Week by learning more about this safe and versatile crop and the potential it holds to bolster American agriculture and the domestic economy.

These products are products that are sold all across America. We ought to have a chance for our farmers—farmers in Nebraska, farmers in Arkansas, farmers in Indiana—to be able to grow this product and reap the benefits of the private economy associated with it.

I yield the floor.

PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

WASTEFUL SPENDING

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, it is “Waste of the Week” time again, and the waste of the Federal Government's spending just keeps piling up. Today, I am taking a look at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. We all have a stake in this. I am a veteran, but even those of us who are not veterans have a stake in making sure our veterans are getting the use of taxpayer dollars for their benefit for the sacrifices they made.

Over the past year, we have been hearing on the floor and continue to see story after story of mismanagement that is plaguing the VA. Many of these news articles tell the story of our Nation's heroes not receiving the care

or the resources they have earned and that they deserve. Last month—just last month—I read yet another frightening headline, frustrating. “Veterans Affairs improperly spent \$6 Billion annually, senior VA official says”—improperly spent \$6 billion annually.

According to an internal memo written by the VA's senior official for procurement, the VA has been wasting taxpayer money by violating Federal contracting rules to pay for medical care and expenses. Under law, VA purchases require competitive bidding and proper contracts, but testimony from Deputy Assistant Secretary for Acquisition and Logistics Jan Frye, before Congress last month revealed that just the opposite is occurring.

So the medical care and supplies our veterans need for their medical needs are being compromised at a cost of \$6 billion a year. Mr. Frye wrote:

Over the past five years, some senior VA acquisition and finance officials have willfully violated the public trust while Federal procurement and financial laws were debased. Their overt actions and dereliction of duties combined have resulted in billions of taxpayer dollars being spent without regard to Federal laws and regulations, making a mockery of Federal statutes.

An example of this violation is found with VA purchase cards. Typically, VA uses these cards for smaller purchases of up to \$3,000, according to the rules and regulations. But they were inappropriately used to buy billions of dollars' worth of medical supplies without contracts or oversight. Mr. Frye continued:

In addition, doors are flung wide open for fraud, waste and abuse when contracts are not executed. For example, by law, prices paid for goods or services subject to contract can only be determined to be fair and reasonable by duly appointed contracting officers. I can state without reservation that VA has and continues to waste millions of dollars by paying excessive prices for goods and services due to breaches of Federal procurement laws.

According to reports, the VA has failed to engage in a competitive bidding or signing contract process ensuring a good deal for the services they are unable to provide in house, such as specialized tests and surgeries and other procedures. In fact, the VA has paid at least \$5 billion in such fees in violation of Federal rules.

This is yet but another example of what the White House has recognized—as—and I quote—“corrosive culture” at the Veterans' Administration. I think we all agree our 8.7 million American veterans and our more than 130 million taxpayers deserve a lot better. Given the large scale of purchases made by the VA, proper procurement procedures ensure the best products for veterans and the best value for taxpayers.

Aside from higher prices, a lack of contracts can result in a lack of oversight. The VA, just like Congress, is accountable and must be accountable for what it spends. Now, I understand the incredible pressure the VA has been under with the recent influx of new

veterans. I appreciate the good work of many people who work at the VA. Still, no matter the growth in need, it is never in order to violate Federal law. This kind of reckless spending cannot and must not be tolerated.

Each year, Congress sends billions of dollars to the VA to care for our veterans. With those funds, comes an obligation to use every dollar of those funds properly. By simply requiring the VA to comply with Federal law, we can save \$6 billion. This is a simple fix with large results and we should take it.

Today, I am adding an additional \$6 billion to our ever-increasing gauge of taxpayer money that comes to Washington and is spent for improper and unnecessary purposes. We are now two-thirds of the way to our goal of \$100 billion. We are going to be doing this every week as long as the Senate is in session this year. I hope we have to add an additional attachment to this gauge because, folks, there is no end to discovering the kind of waste of taxpayers' money for unnecessary programs, violating the law, violating regulations, mismanaging the spending at the Federal level. We are going to continue to point out these issues week after week. Hopefully, we can get the attention of our colleagues and the American people, and they will demand that we do something about this.

While we have not been able—no thanks to the administration—to come up with a sensible, long-term fix to our deficit spending and continuing plunge into debt, we can at least look at these programs that have been identified by the inspector generals, by the Government Accountability Office, and by the Office of Management and Budget as wasting taxpayer dollars.

So there is much we can do while we are trying to get to the point where we have an administration that allows us to address the larger issue; that is, a government out of control, spending taxpayers' money and wasting money, which we will point out every week. Tune in again next week for the next "Waste of the Week."

I thank my colleague from Nebraska for generously yielding me the time to do this. I have somewhat of a schedule hitch. She was gracious enough to allow me the time.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Nebraska.

NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I rise to speak about the National Defense Authorization Act or NDAA. The brave men and women who serve in our Armed Forces have protected our Nation for generations. Because of their selflessness, we are able to enjoy many freedoms here at home, but it is important to remember that these liberties are not free.

The sacrifices made by our servicemembers are extraordinary, and we must ensure that they have the re-

sources necessary and needed to defend the United States. That is why the NDAA has been passed each of the last 53 years. I was proud to continue this tradition by working with my colleagues on the Senate Armed Services Committee to pass the fiscal year 2016 NDAA only a few weeks ago.

While this bill is not perfect, it is the result of a bipartisan compromise to perform the most important function of the Federal Government, providing for the national defense. This bill's importance is widely known, but the details are not often given enough attention.

For this reason, I would like to take a moment to discuss some of the key provisions that play such a critical role in preserving the security of our Nation and the effectiveness of our military. Included in this bill are several commonsense proposals to cut inefficiencies and use the savings that are generated to better meet the needs of our warfighters.

For example, the Air Force's next-generation bomber and new tanker program have both suffered delays and they cannot spend the full amount requested when the budget was submitted in February. So this bill reduces funding for these programs accordingly and moves about \$660 million in savings to meet unfunded requirements of our military.

Across a large number of budget lines, unjustified increases were reduced, troubled programs were cut, and again the difference was used to meet high-priority requirements of our men and women in uniform.

The bill also combats the continued growth in headquarters staff at the Pentagon and major commands, an issue I discussed with Secretary Carter at his confirmation hearing. Two years ago, the Department announced its intention to reduce 20 percent of its headquarters staff by 2019. However, it has yet to provide the Armed Services Committee with a plan to accomplish these reductions.

This legislation takes action. It reduces funding for headquarters and management staff by 7.5 percent. This goes beyond even the Department's stated goal. It results in \$1.7 billion in savings that are reprioritized to support more important needs. In all, the bill moves about \$10 billion from unnecessary spending to increase the capabilities of our warfighters. One such area is the development of the advanced technologies.

This bill sets aside \$400 million for the offset initiative announced by the Department in November of last year. The technological superiority of our forces has come under increasing threat in recent years. This is an issue that the Emerging Threats and Capabilities Subcommittee, which I chair, has followed closely.

The new funding devoted to this initiative is targeted toward the development of the next-generation technology, such as lasers and railguns that

will enable our military's continued advantage on the battlefield of the future.

I am also pleased that this bill will fully support the modernization of our nuclear forces, and it includes additional funding requested by the Department to address critical needs in our nuclear forces identified in reviews last year.

The bill reauthorizes key assistance and training programs, and it also provides the Secretary of Defense new authority to partner with nations in the Middle East, the South Pacific, and Eastern Europe to support U.S. interests in these key regions. It also codifies the Department of Defense's role in defending the Nation in cyber space, and it requires the Department to regularly conduct training exercises with other governmental agencies to meet this responsibility.

The importance of the last two issues I mentioned, cyber security and security assistance programs, was reinforced during a recent trip that I led to Eastern Europe.

Our allies there are deeply concerned by Russia's military intervention in Ukraine and their increasingly provocative behavior. They are all calling for more cooperation with the United States in both of these key areas.

These are just a few of the reasons why the NDAA is such an important piece of legislation. While I strongly support many of its provisions, it is important to repeat that this is the product of bipartisan compromise, not consensus.

One of the most hotly debated topics during the committee's markup process was the use of overseas contingency operations funds to meet basic defense requirements. In a world where ISIL continues to expand its reach, Russia has seized Crimea and pours fighters into eastern Ukraine, and China is intimidating its neighbors and building islands in the South China Sea, we must fund our national defense. To not do so would be unacceptable. We cannot hold our military hostage to a political controversy.

Despite disagreements, the committee has again produced a compromise product—as it has year after year—that supports our national defense and the needs of our men and women in uniform. I am inspired by their service, and I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues to protect our great Nation as the full Senate considers the NDAA.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Rhode Island.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Madam President, I understand that we are now in a period of morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mrs. FISCHER). The Senator is correct.

Mr. WHITEHOUSE. Therefore, it is not in order for me to call up an amendment to the Defense bill. I will come back and get this amendment pending at the appropriate time on the floor.