

Again, recognizing that this is so substantive from a domestic policy perspective is something that I think the occupant of the Chair, as well as Senator HEITKAMP, as well as Senator HENRICH from New Mexico—all producing States—can recognize the enormous gains. But I think we also need to consider the very real, very substantive difference that we will make when as an energy superpower are able to share our resources—whether it is oil, whether it is natural gas—to help whether it is our friends in Europe, whether it is Poland, which is 95-percent reliant on Russia for its oil, whether it is South Korea or Japan.

Alaska has been able to export its oil since 1996, when we received basically a waiver. We have seen the benefits that oil exports bring. Our State has had the ability to do so. Why should the rest of the country not see that benefit?

Again, since 1996, with our oil, we have exported our natural gas from Cook Inlet, and it has actually been the longest term export contract that this country has seen as far as natural gas. We have seen the benefit. We know that when we are the export trading partner, we as a nation benefit from it. Whether it is jobs, revenues, growth or prosperity, this is good, this is a win, and it is very important. Again, I appreciate the efforts of so many that have brought us to the place that we are today.

I think we acknowledge that, yes, there are heavy legislative lifts around here. But I think we work constructively to build the case, to try to depoliticize to the extent possible, to avoid the partisanship that can come into specific issues, by saying: Let's examine this from a policy perspective. Does it make sense to lift sanctions on Iran for their oil and keep in place a ban on our U.S. oil producers, effectively sanctioning U.S. oil producers? I think we got a lot of colleagues when we raised that question to them: Think about it from a policy perspective and whether it is good or outdated. This one is outdated, and it was time to go.

So I thank Senator HEITKAMP for yielding for just a moment and allowing me to speak very briefly to what I think is very significant for this country, both domestically and internationally. Let's let the United States of America be that energy superpower that we are.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Mississippi.

PASSENGER RAIL SYSTEM

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I rise first to commend the three Senators who have just completed their colloquy. They have been discussing an accomplishment this year that results from bipartisan efforts. I too would like to speak about a bipartisan effort that I have been engaged in with the Senator from New Jersey, who joins me on the floor today, which would be the

passenger rail portion of the Transportation bill which the President has already signed.

So I ask unanimous consent that the Senator from New Jersey and I be allowed to engage in a colloquy concerning this legislation.

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

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, I am so pleased to have worked with Senator BOOKER on the rail portion and on the entire Transportation bill. I am pleased it has passed the House and Senate and been signed into law by the President—a major accomplishment.

I would note that predecessors of ours from our States were part of the last major effort for a comprehensive rail bill. My predecessor, Trent Lott, along with the late Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey, were the authors of the Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act, which was introduced in 2007, and much work on it was done before Senator Lott resigned at the end of 2007. It was actually passed in 2008. So I think it is quite appropriate that Senator BOOKER and I would be allowed to follow in their footsteps and participate in this legislation, which deals with making our rail system safer in the United States and more efficient and puts greater attention on planning and efficiency. I know that Senator BOOKER shares my enthusiasm for the accomplishment that this Congress has made in that regard.

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I would first say thank you. I do share that enthusiasm. I appreciate the way the Senator began his remarks. This is a tradition of bipartisanship that goes beyond the Senator and me, but I want to say this about Senator WICKER because I am new to the Senate. I am here about 25 months now. But this last full year when I have been working on this passenger rail bill as the ranking member of that subcommittee, I have found him to be tough, to be balanced, to be strong and thoughtful about what is best for America, thinking about our country first, thinking about his great State, our country, how we are going to create jobs and how we are going to improve in an increasingly globally competitive environment. It has been an honor to work with him. I think what we accomplished together is extraordinary, and it is going to have a profound impact.

This bill makes critical investments in our rail infrastructure. It makes important safety reforms, and it helps to move our country forward, literally and figuratively.

Rail efficiency and safety is critical to our national success. It is a priority. This idea of protecting Americans is a priority of both Senator WICKER and me, and it is critical that we have rail safety, especially as we go forward. I have seen, unfortunately, in the past some very challenging accidents.

For me and my constituents in New Jersey, rail is incredibly important. We are part of the Northeast Corridor,

which is probably the busiest rail corridor in the country. It is one of the most productive regions of our Nation, and, unfortunately, it has an inadequate infrastructure. More people use rail than fly in that corridor. The challenge is that the corridor itself has become a choke hold right around the New York-New Jersey region. One of the reasons is because the Hudson River crossing—the busiest river crossing in the United States of America—has tunnels that are inadequate and ineffective at this point. These tunnels were built back in 1910. Nobody in this body remembers those years, personally, but the tunnel began construction 1 year after the famous flights at Kitty Hawk were just getting off the ground in air travel. These tunnels were completed less than a decade before the start of the First World War.

So today, these tunnels are in horrible condition. The whole region is suffering as a result of it. I hear time and again from constituents about the urgency for investment in rail. Residents now, because of the delays, because of the challenges with New Jersey Transit, have to leave earlier for work, miss time with their families, miss dropping off their kids at school, lose out on productivity. The productivity losses in this region amount to hundreds of millions of dollars. So this is an urgent cause for us. That is why I was so grateful, really celebrating the fact that we have a partnership in the Senate that can actually get something done when it comes to rail travel.

For us in this region, we know the challenges. We have tunnels under the Hudson River that are clearly in a state of significant decay and disrepair that some engineers say have less than a decade on them. One single day of missing access to those tunnels for that artery could hurt our regional economy by about \$100 million for one single day in wasted productivity.

So this spring Senator WICKER and I joined together to introduce this legislation, the Railroad Enhancement and Efficiency Act. That bill is making critical investments. The bill very critically would allow the Northeast Corridor to reinvest its profits into that region, which is going to be significant for helping to give us a 21st century competitive infrastructure. That is something I cannot understate the urgency of. The bill adds critical safety provisions that will help with positive train control.

Earlier, as was mentioned by Senator WICKER, the Chamber passed the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, or FAST Act, a 5-year, \$305 billion transportation compromise bill that, for the first time, includes the rail provisions that I am proud to say were in our Railroad Enhancement and Efficiency Act.

So this bill that passed the Senate will enable critical projects, such as the Hudson Tunnel plan. It is going to achieve incredible safety for our communities. I just want to again thank

Senator WICKER for his noble service. I am sure he and I would both like to thank Senators THUNE and NELSON, the ranking members on the overall committee, who worked to ensure that our bill was part of the massive highway transportation bill. There is our long-term economic competitiveness as a country. We talked about national security. Well, our economy fuels our strength at home and abroad. Investing in infrastructure, which has a long history of being a bipartisan priority, is something on which I am proud to join with Senator WICKER and continue that great American tradition of investing in our communities, creating more growth, creating more jobs, and creating a strong economy, which makes for a strong nation.

Mr. WICKER. Mr. President, it probably doesn't come as a surprise for people to hear a Senator from the northeast be such a strong advocate of passenger rail and Amtrak. But I can tell you as this representative of Mississippi and a Senator from the southeastern part of the United States, we believe in passenger rail, too. It is important to the entire national economy, and so it is important to our economy. It is also important to the economy in my region of the country.

I am pleased and excited about the possibility of restoring passenger rail to the gulf coast for the first time since Hurricane Katrina. We made it work between New Orleans and the Mississippi gulf coast and Mobile and Orlando before the storm, and we think we can make it work now.

One provision in the bill establishes a new gulf coast working group, which will receive a \$500,000 grant specifically for the purpose of returning rail to the area. Another provision creates a grant program that can assist applicants like the Southern Rail Commission and has worked to restore passenger rail to the gulf coast.

In addition, I am an advocate of competition, so I am pleased to see that this new legislation opens up the possibility of having private rail carriers competing for up to three of Amtrak's long-distance routes. I think in this way we can achieve cost savings, better performance, and good worker protections.

In closing, let me say that we are glad the law has been passed and signed. It seems from this angle that it was so inevitable, but I can tell you and I think Members of the floor on the Senate who are listening to this colloquy would have to admit that this didn't have to happen. As a matter of fact, it could easily have fallen off the rails or fallen off the tracks.

On a bipartisan basis, people on this side of the aisle and on Senator BOOKER's side of the aisle did not allow the distractions and the naysayers to prevail. We insisted that if we kept working, we could get this entire package done on a bipartisan basis.

I wish to salute Republican Members in the majority who put this forward

from a committee standpoint, but I also want to salute my Democratic brothers and sisters who said: Yes, we can do this, and we ought to do it not as Republicans and Democrats but as Americans for the American economy. My hat is off to my partner in this effort and to everyone on both sides of the aisle for making this a reality.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Jersey.

Mr. BOOKER. Mr. President, I want to say in conclusion that there is that story about the little engine that could and that did not give up and worked through trials and tribulations. Senator WICKER represented the values in that story. I am grateful to have worked with him on this project, and I look forward to working with him again to move our country forward.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maryland.

OMNIBUS LEGISLATION

Ms. MIKULSKI. Mr. President, I rise to speak on the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2016, otherwise known as the omnibus. Three months ago, it was unclear if we would get a budget deal that would lift the caps for both defense and nondefense spending. It was unclear if we could really not head to a shutdown. It was not clear if we were heading to a shutdown, and we were not clear if we could cancel sequester.

I am proud to say, as the vice chair of the Appropriations Committee, that the committee has completed its work. We have done it in a bipartisan way and in a way that there will not be a shutdown of the government. We have canceled sequester, and we have done this in a responsible way.

The House is working on the bill now. We shall be voting on it tomorrow. Tomorrow I will talk about the national implications of the bill when it comes before the Senate, but today, as the Senator from Maryland and for Maryland, I wish to talk about the public investments this bill makes to support the Nation's needs, which also supports Maryland's needs, which supports Maryland's jobs.

As the vice chair of the committee, my first job—and as the Constitution requires—is to be the Senator from Maryland, and I require myself to be the Senator for Maryland. I am proud to say that this bill does make the kinds of public investments that I believe will help America's and Maryland's future.

This bill delivers on a promise I made many years ago that I would look after the day-to-day needs of my constituents and the long-range needs of this country.

You will be interested to know that Maryland is the home to 20 major Federal facilities with more than 200,000 Federal employees and retirees. We have great military installations, such as Fort Meade, the National Security Agency, Cyber Command, the U.S. Naval Academy, Naval Bethesda, and

Walter Reed. It also has great public institutions, such as the National Institutes of Health, the National Weather Bureau, the national NOAA satellites that tell us what the weather will be, and also agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration.

Although we have the Federal assets in Maryland, they serve the Nation. These aren't Maryland's institutions; these are national institutions, but they employ Marylanders.

In this bill, working on a bipartisan basis, we have increased the funding for the National Institutes of Health by \$2 billion, increasing it to \$32 billion. Working with both Senator MURRAY, the ranking member, and Senator BLUNT, the chair of the subcommittee, we have nicknamed the National Institutes of Health the "National Institutes of Hope." Why? Because it looks to find the cures and breakthroughs for America's devastating diseases, from cancer to Alzheimer's. But at the same time, while we have worked on funding the research to find cures and breakthroughs, they must be moved to clinical practice. That is why we in Maryland have fought so hard to make sure the Food and Drug Administration is capitalized in a way that it does its job.

The Food and Drug Administration, which employs over 4,000 people, is responsible for our food safety, both here and as it comes in from abroad, and also for being able to move drugs, biologics, and medical devices into clinical practice and demonstrating that they are both safe and effective. It is a big job, and it is a big employer in our State.

We also want to make sure that we look out for those who are the most needy. This Senate and this Congress often talk about Social Security and it also talks about Medicare. Both of those—the Social Security Administration and CMS—are located in Maryland. We are very proud of that. The Social Security Administration is in a community called Baltimore County, a neighborhood called Woodlawn. It has a building that is 57 years old, and it hasn't had any improvements since 1959. They work in terrible situations, with mold, decay, crumbling technology, and even vermin. We make sure that those who administer the Social Security Program have the right facilities and also have the right technology.

We worked very hard to be able to stand up for our Federal employees. Again, working on a bipartisan basis, we allowed a 1.46 percent cost-of-living adjustment.

We were absolutely appalled to find out about the OPM data breach, which had a devastating effect on over 130,000 Federal employees both here and around this country. What we did, working on this bill, we are going to make sure that the Federal employees have 10 years of credit protection since OPM fell down on its job in protecting them.