

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

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

CUBA TRADE ACT

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to speak about legislation I have recently introduced, although it is a follow-on to legislation I pursued over a number of years.

We have now introduced in this Congress the Cuba Trade Act. This is legislation which would lift the trade embargo to allow farmers and ranchers and small businesses and other private sector industries to freely conduct business, to sell products—agricultural products in particular—to the nation of Cuba and to its people.

Last month, I spoke about the terrific difficulties our farmers in Kansas and across the country are facing due to low commodity prices. The farm economy has fallen by nearly 50 percent since 2013, and that decline is expected to continue in 2017, making this perhaps, if not the worst, certainly one of the worst economic downturns in farm country since the Great Depression.

In 2016, harvests in our State and across much of the country were record-breaking yields and historic in their magnitude, in fact. What that means is there are still piles of wheat, corn, and other grains all across Kansas just sitting on the ground next to the grain mill bins that are already filled to capacity. To sell this excess supply, our farmers need more markets to sell the food and fiber they produce.

Approximately 95 percent of the world's customers live outside U.S. borders. Markets in the United States will continue to grow, and they will evolve and will continue to meet the domestic consumer demand, providing the best, highest quality, safest food supply in the world, but in order to boost prices for American farmers, we need more markets. We need them now, we need them in the future, and we need to be able to indicate to our farmers that hope is in the works in global markets.

We have talked about the importance of trade, of exports from the United States, and particularly for the citizens of Kansas. That is particularly true for an agricultural State like ours where, again, 95 percent of the consumers live someplace outside of the United States. Cuba is only 90 miles off our border. They offer the potential for increased exports of all sorts of products but especially Kansas wheat.

In fact, while we are introducing this legislation now, we started down this path to increase our ability to sell agriculture commodities, food, and medicine to Cuba back when I was a Member of the House of Representatives. I offered an amendment then to an appropriations bill that lifted the embargo—the ability to sell; it would allow the ability to sell those foods, agricul-

tural commodities, and medicine to Cuba for cash, up front. That bill was passed. It was controversial then. This issue of what our relationship ought to be with Cuba has always been contentious. But I remember the vote was about I think 301 to 116. A majority of Republicans and a majority of Democrats said it is time to do something different with our relationship with Cuba.

This was a significant step in opening up the opportunity to the products of American farmers and ranchers to that country. No longer were food, medicine, and agriculture commodities prohibited from being sold. And it worked for a little while, but unfortunately, in 2005, the Treasury Department changed the regulations, and it complicated the circumstances related to the embargo.

Cuba imports the vast majority of its food. In fact, wheat is Cuba's second largest import, second only to oil.

A point I would stress is that this is a unilateral sanction. Keep in mind that when we don't sell agricultural commodities to Cuba, somebody else does. While our unilateral trade barriers block our own farmers and ranchers from filling the market, willing sellers such as Canada, France, China, and others benefit at American farmers' expense. When we can't sell wheat that comes from a Kansas wheat field to Cuba, they are purchasing that wheat from France and Canada and other European countries. When the Presiding Officer's rice crop can't be sold to Cuba, it is not that they are not buying rice; they are buying it from Vietnam, China, or elsewhere.

It costs about \$6 to \$7 per ton to ship grain from the United States to Cuba. It costs about \$20 to \$25 to ship that same grain from the European Union. However, we lose this competitive advantage because of the regulations in place that drive up the cost of Cuban consumers dealing with the United States.

To understand what we are missing out on in Cuba, consider our current trade relationship with the Dominican Republic. The DR is also a nearby Caribbean nation with a population comparable to Cuba. Income levels and diet are similar. Between 2013 and 2015, the Dominican Republic imported an average of \$1.3 billion of U.S. farm products. During that same time span, Cuba imported just \$262 million—over \$1 billion in difference. That is right. That is \$1 billion of exports that U.S. farmers are missing an opportunity on because of the U.S. trade restrictions on Cuba. This example helps illustrate the substantial potential that exists for increased sale of agriculture commodities to Cuba.

The Cuba Trade Act I just introduced simply seeks to amend our own country's laws so that American farmers can operate on a level playing field with the rest of the world. While boosting American exports remains the primary goal of lifting the embargo, I also think there is an opportunity for us to

increase the reforms and to improve the lives of the Cuban people as well.

I have often said here on the Senate floor and on the House floor and back home in Kansas we often say: We will try something once. If it doesn't work, we might even try it again. Maybe we will try it a third or a fourth time. But after more than 50 years of trying to change the nature of the Cuban Government through this kind of action, through this embargo, many Kansans would say it is time to try something else.

The Cuban embargo was well-intentioned at the time it was enacted. Today, however, it only serves to hurt our own national interests by restricting Americans' freedom to conduct business with that country. In my view, it is time to make a change, and we ought to be able to sell wheat, rice, and other agricultural commodities from the United States for cash to Cuba. This legislation would allow that at no expense to the American taxpayer.

KANSAS WILDFIRES

Mr. President, there is a lot to be proud about in being a Kansan. We have lots of challenges in our State, and we are undergoing serious ones at the moment. For those who have noticed on the news, although it is not particularly a story here in the Nation's Capital, Kansas is ablaze. Fires are devastating acres and acres. In fact, nearly 700,000 acres of grasslands in our State have been burned. Fires have started. We have had winds for the last 3 days of 50 to 60 miles an hour, and dozens of communities and counties have been evacuated. Lots of places have been hard hit. My home county of Rooks experienced those fires. Hutchinson, a community of 50,000 people, had to evacuate 10,000 people in what we would consider in our State a pretty big place. So they have been rampant and they have been real, and there have been significant consequences to many lives in our State.

As people know, Kansas is an agriculture place. We raise lots of crops, but we are certainly a livestock State, and our ranchers are experiencing the significant challenges that come from loss of pasture, the death of their cattle, and the burning of their fences.

On my way over here, I was reading a couple of articles that appeared in the Kansas press that I wanted to bring to my colleagues' attention. There is nothing here that necessarily asks for any kind of government help, but it does highlight the kind of people I represent.

There is a farm in Clark County. The county seat is Ashland. It is on the border with Oklahoma. Eighty-five percent of the county's grassland, 85 percent of the acres in that county have been burned. This means the death of hundreds, if not thousands, of cattle in that county. That is the economic driver of the communities there. Ashland, the county seat, has a population of

about 900 or 1,000—the biggest town in the county—and its future rests in large part upon what happens in agriculture.

There are lots of great ranch families in our State. One of those is the Gardiners. The Gardiner Ranch is in Clark County. Their story is told a bit in today's edition of the Wichita Eagle. They are known as some of the best ranchers in the country. For more than 50 years, they have provided the best Angus cattle. They have customers across the country. It is a family ranch. This is multigenerational, and three brothers now ranch together. It is not an unusual way that we do business in Kansas.

In addition to the economic circumstances that agriculture presents in our State, it is one of the reasons I appreciate the opportunity to advocate on behalf of farmers and ranchers. It is one of the last few places in which sons and daughters work side by side with moms and dads, and grandparents are involved in the operation. Grandkids grow up knowing their grandparents. There is a way of life here that is important to our country. Our values, our integrity, and our character are often transmitted from one generation to the next in this circumstance because we are still able to keep the family together, working generation to generation. The Gardiners are an example of that, but there are hundreds of Kansans who exemplify this.

I would like to tell the story of Mr. Gardiner, as reported by the Wichita Eagle. Mr. Gardiner said that he was slowly driving by some of his estimated 500 cattle that had died in this massive wildfire, and he complained on their behalf that they never had a chance. The fire was so fast. His ranch, as I said, is one of the most respected. The quality of the family's Angus cattle has been a source of pride and national attention for more than 50 years.

Like others, the Gardiners have endured plenty of bumps—and this is him telling their story—over five generations of ranching. The drought and dust of the 1930s was tough, he said, and there were even drier times in the 1950s. About 5 years ago, there was another drought in our State that was so devastating. He said his family lost 2,000 acres when they couldn't make a payment to the bank. Blizzards in 1992 killed a lot of cattle.

My point is that nothing is easy about this life, but there is something so special about it. The point I want to make is that people are responding to help, and I thank Kansans and others from across the country who are responding to the disasters that are occurring across our State throughout this week and into the future. This isn't expected to go away anytime soon.

Mr. Gardiner said that more hay is on the way, and the process of rebuilding fences will begin, hopefully, within a few weeks. He said he was sent word that Mennonite relief teams were com-

ing from two Eastern States to work on his fences and to do so without pay. Truckloads of hay are already en route and rolling in. This story indicates that many of those truckloads of hay are coming from ranchers who in the past have bought livestock from the Gardiners.

Mr. Gardiner's veterinarian, Randall Spare, said that the Gardiners have long been known for taking exceptional care of their customers. The veterinarian says, "Now it's their turn" for the customers to repay them. "The Gardiners are the cream of the crop, like their cattle. I'm not surprised so many people [from so many places] are wanting to help them."

The reporter says that while he was talking to Mr. Gardiner for this interview, Mr. Gardiner answered his cell phone as his pickup slowly rolled across a landscape that now looked so barren. The reporter said that many of the calls were from clients who just called to send their best or to be brought up to date and to ask the Gardiners how they could help and how the Gardiners were holding up.

Mr. Gardiner said:

It's really something [special], when you hear a pause on the other end of the line and you know it's because [the person who called is] crying because they care that much. It gets like that with ranching. It's like we're all family.

That is a great thing about our State. It is like that with Kansas. We are all a family. But the fact is that his family is still alive. He tells the story of not knowing whether his brother and his wife were alive. The fire swept around them, but they found a place that avoided the fire, a wheat field where the wheat was still green and so short that the fire didn't intrude. But he stopped his truck to think a bit and, the story indicates, to sob a bit.

He watched as his brother Mark and his wife Eva disappeared behind a wall of fire as they tried to save their horses and dogs at their home. Ultimately, the house was destroyed. Mr. Gardiner, the one the reporter was talking to, said:

I had no choice but to turn around and drive away, with the fire all around me. For a half-hour I didn't know if my brother and his wife were dead or alive. I really didn't.

He said that then his brother and his wife and some firefighters gathered in the middle of that wheat field. It was so short and so green, it wouldn't burn. He said:

It was so smoky I didn't even know exactly where we were at. But then a firefighter came driving by and told us everybody made it out. That's when I knew Mark and his wife were alive. That's when I knew everything would eventually be all right. I am telling you, that's when you learn what's really important.

So today I come to the Senate floor to express my gratitude for the opportunity to represent Kansans like the Gardiners, farmers and ranchers across our State but city folks, as well, who know the importance of family, who know that living or dying is an important

aspect of life but that how they live is more important, and to thank those people—not just from Kansas but from across the country—who have rallied to the cause to make sure there is a future for these families and for the farming and ranching operations.

It is a great country in which we care so much for each other, and that is exemplified in this time of disaster that is occurring across my State. I am grateful to see these examples, and I would encourage my colleagues that we behave the way Kansas farmers and ranchers do—live life for the things that are really meaningful and make sure we take care of each other.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

CLOTURE MOTION

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Pursuant to rule XXII, the Chair lays before the Senate the pending cloture motion, which the clerk will state.

The bill clerk read as follows:

CLOTURE MOTION

We, the undersigned Senators, in accordance with the provisions of rule XXII of the Standing Rules of the Senate, do hereby move to bring to a close debate on the nomination of Seema Verma, of Indiana, to be Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, Department of Health and Human Services.

Mitch McConnell, Steve Daines, John Cornyn, Tom Cotton, Bob Corker, John Boozman, John Hoeven, James Lankford, Roger F. Wicker, John Barra, Lamar Alexander, Orrin G. Hatch, David Perdue, James M. Inhofe, Mike Rounds, Bill Cassidy, Thom Tillis.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. By unanimous consent, the mandatory quorum call has been waived.

The question is, Is it the sense of the Senate that debate on the nomination of Seema Verma, of Indiana, to be Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, shall be brought to a close?

The yeas and nays are mandatory under the rule.

The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk called the roll.

Mr. CORNYN. The following Senators are necessarily absent: the Senator from Georgia (Mr. ISAKSON), and the Senator from Florida (Mr. RUBIO).

Further, if present and voting, the Senator from Florida (Mr. RUBIO) would have voted "yea."

The PRESIDING OFFICER. (Mr. PERDUE). Are there any other Senators in the Chamber desiring to vote?

The yeas and nays resulted—yeas 54, nays 44, as follows: