

touches every family. The President was particularly concerned about those whose preexisting condition was opioid addiction. We have to recognize that they will not get better unless they receive treatment. It is better to treat than it is to incarcerate or to bury. So we must honor the President's pledge there.

He also pledged to cover all and to lower premiums. It is this last I wish to focus on now.

How do we lower premiums? How do we say to Tina, who 2 years ago was paying \$500 more a month, that her premium will be lower? Well, there are several ways. Let me focus first on lowering the cost of care.

Right now, healthcare is way too expensive. If you go in for an urgent care visit, you may pay \$1,500 in one urgent care center and \$50 in another. As a patient, you do not know. You would never buy a car that way. Can you imagine walking into a car dealership, picking your car, and then saying: Bill me 6 months from now, and I will pay whatever you ask. No one would do that. We shouldn't ask the average patient to do it because when we hide those costs from the patient, we do not allow her to be an informed consumer. Lacking information, she inevitably pays more.

So one thing I have proposed, along with Senator COLLINS and four other Senators—Senators from South Carolina, South Dakota, Georgia, and West Virginia—is price transparency, which is to say that when someone goes in to get their daughter's ear ache addressed, they know what it would cost at this urgent care center versus another.

A good example of exactly what I am talking about—there was an article in the Los Angeles Times a few years ago about the cash price of a CT scan in the Los Angeles Basin. It would vary from \$250 to \$2,500, and the person purchasing the service with cash would never know.

I envision a time when someone takes their smart phone and they scan a barcode, and the barcode says: You can go at midnight on Thursday and get a CT scan of your daughter for \$250 or you can go right now and pay \$2,500. You look at a quality code, and both have equal quality. I can see the mother turning to her daughter and saying "Baby, we are staying up Thursday night" because that mother knows she can take care of her family's financial health, as well as her daughter's health, just by being an informed consumer.

So one way we lower premiums is by lowering the cost of healthcare, and the way we lower the cost of healthcare is by empowering patients with the knowledge of price.

The second way we can manage to lower the cost of premiums is to take care of those who are sick. The Senator from Tennessee ended by speaking about our commitment to care for those with preexisting conditions. Of

course it is in the interest of the patient that he or she who has cancer is able to get care for their cancer. Jimmy Kimmel just spoke about his son being born with a congenital heart condition. He would have quickly died. Mr. Kimmel choked up as he spoke about it. Well, shouldn't every family have the reassurance that their child born in such a way would also have their needs addressed? I was struck that Nick Mulvaney, President Trump's OMB Director, agreed with Mr. Kimmel. This is not a Republican issue, not a Democratic issue; it is an American issue. But it is also in society's interest.

I am a physician. I worked in a public hospital for the uninsured for 30 years. I tell folks, as long as that emergency room door was open, no matter what time, day or night, in through that door came folks who had all kinds of healthcare conditions. Some of them would come every week. Some of them would come twice a week. We called them frequent fliers. They may have been addicted or mentally ill. They may have had terrible diabetes which was fully controlled or bad asthma, and they would come in with an exacerbation and could not breathe. Every time they came in, there was a \$2,000 to \$20,000 charge—every time. But if you manage that patient through a primary care office or an attached urgent care center, what you are charging \$2,000 for here, you can manage for \$150 there. Not only that, when you manage it for \$150 there, if that person actually works, she is more likely to hold a job, more likely to support her family, less likely to go on dependence, more likely to pay taxes. Society wins as she wins. That should be our goal. So another way to lower premiums is to actively manage the cost of disease.

People always say: We want government to run like a business. Let me describe what happens in a large corporation. Take ExxonMobil. You will find that ExxonMobil has an insurance company, a third-party administrator. They look at someone who is a high-cost employee, and they actively engage in managing that patient's illness so that, one, they are better, but, two, they lower cost. We as a government should do that, which a responsible employer does as well.

The last thing I want to mention is that the way to lower premiums is by expanding coverage. When Candidate Trump said he wanted to lower premiums and preserve coverage, he understood that the two are linked. If you have a big risk pool—and a risk pool is just the folks who are insured. Everybody who has insurance—that is called the risk pool. If it is big, with lots of young folks who are in their twenties, others in their thirties and forties, and then a few folks like me in their fifties, if someone gets sick, you spread the expense of that one over the many. Particularly if the many include the younger and healthier, there is a subsidy for the older and sicker.

Go back to ExxonMobil. Let's imagine they have 50,000 employees. If they have 50,000 employees and 10 of them get cancer, have liver transplants, terrible car wrecks, or accidents, their premiums don't even blip. Because you spread the cost of these expensive illnesses over the many, all benefit, and cost is held down.

So when President Trump pledged to preserve coverage, he was recognizing that nexus between having a big risk pool and lowering that premium.

Let me finish by saying this: My commitment to Tina and my commitment to the voters of Louisiana and the people of the United States is to try to lower premiums. They cannot afford the un-Affordable Care Act. The way we can do that, which I have outlined today, includes empowering patients with the knowledge of price to lower the cost of healthcare; encouraging coverage that manages those who are sick so that those who are sick stay well and are less likely to consume expensive emergency room care, as an example, but are also more likely to live full, vibrant lives; and lastly, restoring what is called actuarial soundness, the law of big numbers, a risk pool in which if one of us gets cancer, that cost is spread over many.

Mr. President, if we manage to lower premiums, we will fulfill our promise to the American people, and I look forward to working with my colleagues to fulfill that promise.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

NORTHEAST COLORADO FIRES

Mr. GARDNER. Mr. President, I come to the floor today to talk about the recent impact of prairie fires in northeastern Colorado. A lot of times when you turn on the national news in the spring, summer, or fall, you might see fires in Colorado, but most of the time those fires are located in western Colorado in the mountains.

We have had some horrible fires in recent years. The past decade has been littered with far too many fires of great consequence to our environment, to families, and to homes—and the damage they have caused. Oftentimes we don't see as much in the news about fires in other parts of the State, including the Eastern Plains of Colorado, the Great Plains and prairies.

At the end of March, Logan and Phillips Counties saw a blaze that burned 32,000 acres, destroying homes, harming cattle and farm operations, and shutting down a key interstate corridor. To put 32,000 acres into perspective, in 2016, the largest fire in Colorado was the Beaver Creek fire near

Walden, burning tens of thousands of acres over the course of 3 months. The fire burned about 38,000 acres. The fire burning 32,000 acres in northeastern Colorado took only about 24 hours of time. So we had 38,000 acres burn in 3 months, and 32,000 acres in northeastern Colorado burned in 24 hours. In both cases, these were incredibly dangerous situations to land, people, and those around them.

These images from the Denver Post paint a frightening picture of the devastation the area faced. We can look at these pictures here. You can see what happened with the dirt, debris, smoke, and weather that was created by the fire, and you can see the damage and what happened. You can see the damage to property here.

I want to go back to the earlier picture and talk about some of the other impacts we saw. You can see the firemen from eastern Colorado working to protect property, trying to stop the fire before it reached the homestead.

You can see someone with a tractor, and they are trying to disc up the ground, trying to create a firebreak. People from around eastern Colorado, northeastern Colorado were getting into their tractors, getting their tillage equipment, their chisels, discs, and sweeps to try to break up the ground to create a firebreak so that maybe they could stop the fire. I commend the first responders for containing this fire and preventing any loss of life while also preventing other fire hotspots from breaking out into larger, devastating blazes because of the work they did.

In the middle of these fires, I remember talking to a county commissioner from Logan County, and he described the situation where they had tried to create a firebreak with their road graders and the farmers in the field trying to disc up the ground to stop the fire from moving.

I remember vividly when the county commissioner told me that at a certain time of the day he had to make a phone call that he would never forget in his life. He called the county commissioners from the neighboring county and said that the fire was moving that way. He said: Hey, I want you to know, Logan County is unable to stop the fire. It is coming your way. I am sorry; it is in your hands now.

Imagine that phone call. This horrible thing that has happened in your county is also spreading to the next county, and you can't do anything about it, despite the incredible efforts and acts of heroism to try to stop it.

Fire departments from across Colorado came to northeastern Colorado in that part of the State to stand alongside local firefighters to get this fire under control. Dozens of agencies and departments responded.

Being from Yuma County, south of where this fire took place, I know how alarming and unforgiving these fast-moving prairie fires can be on the farmers, ranchers, and communities in their path. I fought prairie fires as well

in northeastern Colorado and know how fast they move and how indiscriminate they are in their destruction.

I also know the challenges people now face in Phillips and Logan Counties as they try to recover in the spring, but I can confidently say that the community is recovering. According to local agronomist, Dave Gibson:

Within six days of the fire, 85 percent of the cropland was planted with oats to prevent soil erosion with neighbors volunteering to help and donate. It was an amazing effort.

My office has been in communication with State and Federal officials, along with those impacted, to ensure we are doing everything possible to assist in this process.

Those from northeastern Colorado are dependent upon agriculture for their way of life. Two-thirds of Colorado's agricultural production comes from the South Platte River valley, those areas considered to be in northeastern Colorado. I have spoken on the Senate floor about the difficult times these farmers are facing outside of the context of national disasters. When times are already tough, seeing your land and cattle operation burned up in a prairie fire makes things even worse. It is during these challenging times in agriculture, whether it is the impact of fire or low commodity prices, that we are reminded of the need for effective leadership.

I was pleased this last week when the Chamber came together in a bipartisan fashion to confirm Governor Sonny Perdue of Georgia as our Secretary of Agriculture. Senators on both sides of the aisle recognized that supporting our Nation's farmers and ranchers is not a partisan issue.

It is my hope that we can support Secretary Perdue to expeditiously confirm the rest of his team at USDA because we need it in agriculture. Whether it is the FSA or a crop insurance issue as a result of a fire or a situation relating to trade and how we are going to address low commodity prices, the Secretary of Agriculture needs a team around him. Congress must work with Secretary Perdue to address this crisis in agriculture.

In Colorado, we have seen net farm incomes drop 80 percent since the record highs of 2011. If you look at this headline, this was in the Wall Street Journal some weeks ago. The headline says: "The Next American Farm Bust Is Upon Us." That is because if you look at just the State of Colorado alone, there has been a drop of 80 percent in farm income from the record highs of 2011. That is net farm income down 80 percent.

I believe this Congress needs to act with a four-pronged approach.

First, we need a long-term farm policy in place. With the farm bill expiring in September of 2018, Congress must begin negotiating about how we are going to move forward in a responsible fashion. I commend the Senate

and House Agriculture Committees for holding hearings on the next farm bill, and I look forward to conducting our own roundtables and listening sessions to talk about and to learn about and to listen to how we can make a difference. Federal policy certainty with a long-term farm policy is essential for farmers and ranchers.

The second thing we must do is to provide regulatory relief. We have already repealed about \$85 billion worth of regulations over the last 3 months. That is an incredible feat to relieve the American economy from the harm and pressure of \$85 billion worth of regulatory overreach. By relieving the American business community of that \$85 billion worth of regulations and relieving the American family of that pressure as well, it also means we have been able to reduce paperwork by 54 million hours.

Imagine that: \$85 billion worth of regulatory reductions means there is 54 million hours of paperwork that no longer has to be completed. Instead, that money, time, and effort can be invested in growing opportunities and following up on sales leads and making that money work for the business and family instead of just for the government.

When it comes to agriculture, the regulatory relief to address this next American farm crisis—some of that regulatory relief, the \$85 billion, includes measures such as repealing the Bureau of Land Management 2.0 rule or finally getting the waters of the United States regulation out of the way. That is the kind of regulatory relief we have to continue to pursue.

To those who may not know what waters of the United States regulation did, let's take an example in Colorado. Under the EPA's own study, two-thirds of Colorado waterways are described or defined as intermittent flow. Intermittent flow means they don't have water in them year-round. But according to the government, they would be considered navigable waterways. I don't know how you get anything to float down a dry river, but apparently the EPA can. That \$85 billion of regulatory relief includes stopping the waters of the United States rule. We have to continue to peel back the burdensome regulations on American agriculture.

The third thing we have to address is access to finance. Finance is critical to any farmer. There is an old joke, an old saying that if you go out to a farmer—and they may know this already—and ask: How do you make a small fortune in agriculture? The answer is that you start with a large one. I think it is time we fixed that.

Wouldn't it be nice if people weren't just relying on the bank, but they could actually produce enough money to help them into the future, to help them thrive, prosper, grow, and bring in new generations of family? During difficult economic times, when we are facing incredible challenges and low commodity prices, we do need to have

access to financing. Whether it is through the community bank or banks on Wall Street or the Farm Credit Union or farm credit system, farmers, ranchers, and those in agriculture need access to financing to get through this difficult time.

That production loan, that operating loan is how they make it from season to season, harvest to harvest, and planting to planting to make sure they have the ability to stay on the farm. Right now we have a system that I am worried about—a financial regulatory system in place that perhaps a farmer walks into a bank one day, a bank they have been doing business with for 100 years, and they have never missed a payment, but all of a sudden, based on some Washington, DC, formulary, they can no longer get the loan they need to keep them into the next year, even though that bank in their hometown on Main Street knows they will be able to make that payment.

What we have created is a system and financial regulations that are going to make it impossible for some of these farmers to work out the crisis that is upon them. I sent a letter 2 weeks ago to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, requesting a review of all regulations potentially inhibiting rural access to finance.

The fourth thing we have to get right is trade opportunity for American agriculture. With corn and wheat prices near 10-year lows, the most obvious solution is to open up more international markets for agriculture to continue to look for new opportunities to export American agricultural products overseas. The price of commodities for a bushel of corn is about the same price today as it was back when I was born in 1974. Opening up trade opportunities, opening new markets will give us the value-added opportunity to help get more for that bushel of corn.

Some of the greatest opportunities lie in Asia—50 percent of global population, 50 percent of GDP in the near future. Those are markets we have to open up in U.S. agriculture. Those are markets that already have access in many cases to U.S. markets, but if we want to sell products there, sometimes we are hit with tariffs. That is not fair. We have to make sure we are reducing the tariffs we face when we go into their markets because they seem to have unfettered access into ours much of the time.

Those are all measures we can address. The four things are long-term farm policies, regulatory relief, access to financing, trade opportunities that work for the American farmers and ranchers.

Those recent fires in northeast Colorado, as well as fires in past years in Colorado and across the West, are another reminder of the need to address wildfire borrowing. Wildfire borrowing is a process where the Department of Agriculture's Forest Service spends money that it has budgeted for the fires. It runs out of money because it

didn't budget enough money to fight the fires, and it turns around and starts cannibalizing other areas of spending that could actually have been used to help reduce the next forest fire. We have to end the practice of fire borrowing, and we have to work with Secretary Perdue as head of the U.S. Forest Service within the Department of Agriculture to end wildfire borrowing and to improve forest and land management to prevent these uncontrollable fires that we have seen.

Supporting those impacted by fires, whether it is in the forest or around the prairie, is something we should all be able to get behind. In Logan and Phillips Counties, neighbors banded together. They worked to recover and rebuild from the devastation shown on these images. It has happened for generations in eastern Colorado and across this country. When there is a crisis, when there is a tragedy, neighbors help their neighbors. You can see it in these pictures. But we can also help our neighbors here in Washington, DC, and across our country's vast farmlands by doing what is right in addressing these challenges. Just as Logan County and Phillips County banded together, we should band together with American agriculture.

It is my hope that Congress can learn from the lessons taught in the aftermath of these difficult situations to come together, support rural communities, support agriculture, and make sure we support our fire response efforts, importantly, to prevent that next catastrophic fire.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

GOVERNMENT FUNDING LEGISLATION

Mrs. CAPITO. Mr. President, earlier today, the Senate voted to pass the Omnibus appropriations bill for 2017.

This bill is a product of bipartisan negotiations and hard work on the part of our Appropriations Committee, of which I am proud to be a member, and the leadership of both of our parties.

I am encouraged by the overwhelming support for this important legislation that reflects our Nation's priorities and funds the government in a responsible way. I am very pleased—and I can't emphasize this enough; very pleased—that the bill includes a bipartisan provision that keeps the promise of lifetime healthcare benefits for 22,000 coal miners and their families, including 8,500 West Virginians—my home State.

Bankruptcies in the coal industry meant that these miners would have lost their critical health insurance coverage at the end of last year. We passed that little, short-term extension for 4

months, and it was set to expire this coming week.

This appropriations bill provides certainty to these coal mining families. Because of this bill, they will keep the healthcare they earned through their years of hard work.

I worked closely with my West Virginia colleague, Senator JOE MANCHIN, as well as our Representatives—Representatives DAVID MCKINLEY, EVAN JENKINS, and ALEX MOONEY—to get this permanent miners' healthcare fix included in the bill.

I also want to particularly thank our majority leader, Senator MITCH MCCONNELL, for his leadership on behalf of the miners in West Virginia and in his home State of Kentucky, and the rest of Appalachia. I would also like to thank my fellow Republican from the State of Ohio, Senator ROB PORTMAN, who was a champion for those miners as well.

But, most importantly, I would like to thank the miners from across coal country who came to Washington to advocate for their healthcare benefits. I met with dozens—probably hundreds, over the course of the years—of West Virginia miners in my office over the last several years.

Last September, miners came by the thousands to the west front of the Capitol and stood for hours in just excruciatingly hot conditions. These miners and their families put a human face on the issue. They are the reason—they are the reason—that we have a successful result today.

Many of these miners have shared their stories with me through letters and emails and personal stories and visits, and I want to share just a few of their thoughts.

Brenda, a coal miner's widow from West Virginia, wrote that continued healthcare coverage presented a life or death situation for her. She wrote:

I have medical problems, which require monthly doctor visits and prescriptions and I will no longer be able to see my doctors—nor afford the prescriptions should our health insurance be taken away.

Alfred, a retired West Virginia coal miner wrote:

We were not given our health benefits as a gift. We worked hard in the mines every day for a long time, and it was backbreaking, year-to-year.

Howard, another retiree, wrote that he worked in the West Virginia coal mines for 41 years to earn this promise of healthcare benefits.

William, also a retired West Virginia miner, wrote that he has had several surgeries, including one on New Year's Day, 2017. The possible expiration of health benefits and the thought of temporary benefit extensions left him worried about whether he would be able to access necessary followup medical care for his surgery.

After learning that permanent healthcare would be included in this bill, Gisele wrote:

Tonight I will rest soundly knowing that we will be able to afford our medicines.