

it also uses wireless infrastructure, data, and GPS structures to decide what should happen in a field at a given time in that part of the field. There are data centers, autonomous systems, and fiber optics that are a part of agriculture today. If you are linked to broadband and you are in your combine and have a problem, sometimes that problem can be solved in a couple of minutes by quickly accessing your system, seeing where the problem is, resetting what you need to set and moving on, as opposed to the other option, which is calling the repair person, having the technologist come out with their computer, hook it up to your combine, and 5 or 6 hours later, at a time when you are in the critical moments of your annual livelihood, suddenly you are working again, when you could have been working 5 or 6 minutes later if you had been connected like many farmers are today.

Broadband is more than just economic opportunity. Rural hospitals and health clinics are able to use telemedicine to bring services at a level that otherwise would not be available. This is particularly important in mental and behavioral healthcare. A lot of people are every bit as comfortable or more comfortable with telehealth than they are with somebody in the room with them. Also, with intensive care, suddenly all of the resources that may be available 100 miles away can be right there at the point where questions are asked and that information is handled. Suddenly, somebody's life is saved because of the capacity to have that kind of communication.

For years I have tried to lead when I could, and joined my colleagues when they were leading, with numerous letters to the FCC urging it to reform the Universal Service Program for the digital era. Most people who don't have a line to their phone have a way to get a phone in their hand now, but they don't have a way to get this important way to communicate and to compete. It is frustrating, when we see the limited resources we have—the government resources—to put into something like this to see limited funds go to places where you are just creating another provider and more competition, except that the second provider has government money on its side to compete with the first provider that went in with its own money. There is a big difference between unserved and any level of underserved. If you are unserved, like 69 percent of rural Missourians, the idea that somebody else doesn't have enough competition in the place they live doesn't seem to make very much sense to you. If there is a competitive marketplace and somebody wants to go in there and compete and get the prices down, that is all fine, but I think the government focus should be just like it was with telephones 100 years ago—to see that people had the opportunity to have that phone the same as their neighbors in more densely populated areas.

The President recently designated Ajit Pai to be the Chairman of the FCC. We are finally seeing the Commission take actions to address rural broadband. In February, I wrote to the Chairman and urged him to act on the \$2 billion available for rural broadband and open this money up to auction so new entrants into the field, like electric co-ops, can competitively bid alongside everybody else. The FCC has decided to do that.

Tomorrow the Commission will consider a notice to initiate the pre-auction process for this money to deploy fiber optics in parts of Missouri. This will complement other initiatives underway, as the FCC looks at how to address rural broadband. They have launched a \$4.5 billion auction for mobile wireless service in rural areas. They are suspending out-of-date rules that forced small carriers to raise telephone rates. They are launching a proceeding to reduce costs for companies upgrading from copper to fiber optic networks—another FCC initiative. They are launching a broadband advisory committee. These are all steps in the right direction, where you and I live. They will make a difference.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Chairman and others on the Commission on this issue. I think rural broadband is particularly leveling in creating the opportunities that we would like to see. The Commission will now be back up to its five-member intention of how many people are supposed to be there, making those decisions.

There is still work to be done. We need to reduce the digital divide. Connectivity is critical. We also need policies that support efficient network structures that allow people to not just connect to a network but to connect with a network that really works.

Let me talk about one other Missouri issue that relates here.

I said earlier that Kansas City is now our biggest city, our most populous city. Still, St. Louis, I think, by region, is the bigger region, but the city of St. Louis is not as big as Kansas City. In Kansas City, they have an internet exchange called KCIX. It is a peering center that offers tremendous benefits to secondary educational institutions, to high schools, to vocational programs, and to others so they really maximize how they communicate with each other and have the availability of resources in one place much more equally available in others, and large amounts of bandwidth can be diverted by using this peering infrastructure.

Frankly, what is happening in Kansas City this fall is that the North Kansas City School District will establish connections to KCIX. It is estimated that it may save the district almost \$500,000 a year in bandwidth just by looking at peering. If peering helps there, maybe peering is one of the other things we can look at that will help solve the rural broadband challenge as well.

We are going to be working on this. There will be legislation. There will be continuing efforts to urge the FCC to stay on point. We need to do what we can to make communities in rural America productive and competitive and as healthy as they can be.

By the way, there are a lot of stories here to be told. I hope the next time I come to the floor on this topic that I will come to the floor with some things that are happening in my State that would not have happened if there had not been the access to broadband in not very big communities that are suddenly doing business all over the United States and all over the world.

How we do that is by not letting any of our country wither away, where we have existing infrastructure and schools and sidewalks and water systems and by being sure the people who want to live there can live there, just like we are being sure now, as we see a revitalization of some of our downtowns and inner cities. People will want to move back to them and will have reasons and desires to want to do that. We are seeing an upswing there.

I think we can see the same kind of thing happen in other parts of the country if we work to be sure we have an equity of opportunity. One of the major things that will provide that will be having access to broadband that works. I hope we can continue to fight that fight and see the progress we have made just in the last 6 months.

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

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

GREAT LAKES ENVIRONMENTAL SENSITIVITY INDEX BILL

Mr. PETERS. Mr. President, as we head into the month of August, many Americans are planning to spend time along our beautiful coasts. Our country is fortunate to have such a wide variety of natural resources along the Gulf of Mexico, Alaska, Hawaii, and the east and west coasts. However, I am partial to America's best coast: The 4,500 miles of U.S. coastline along the Great Lakes.

Our coastal resources make it possible to move cargo and goods around the world. They provide opportunities for outdoor recreation like fishing and boating and trips to the beach. Our coasts are not only beautiful, providing some of the most scenic vistas and picturesque landscapes our country has to offer; these ecosystems also provide many tangible benefits. They serve as flooding buffers, critical habitats for fish and wildlife, and locations for ports and other marine infrastructure.

In the Great Lakes, our freshwater coastline contains one-fifth of the entire world's fresh water and provides drinking water for over 40 million people. We must be stewards of these areas

so that future generations can also benefit from them. In order to do so, we must properly document and keep track of this precious resource.

That is why I partnered with Senator YOUNG to introduce the bipartisan Great Lakes Environmental Sensitivity Index Act of 2017 to require NOAA to update environmental sensitivity index maps and map products. The bill passed unanimously out of the Commerce Committee this morning by a voice vote and now heads to the full Senate floor for consideration.

Environmental sensitive index—or ESI—maps provide an inventory of our valuable natural and human-use resources along our coasts. These maps chronicle sensitive ecosystems and the presence of various species as they migrate through regions and habitats for threatened and endangered species. They also document where we can access coastal resources from beaches and parks to docks, ferries, and boat ramps.

We must maintain an up-to-date inventory of these precious coastal resources so that we know exactly where we need to focus our response efforts in a worst-case scenario of a harmful oil or chemical spill. Accurate documentation of these resources and their vulnerabilities is critical to both deploying the right response effort when a spill or accident occurs and assessing the damage and restoration efforts needed after the fact.

In places like the Straits of Mackinac, where a 64-year-old oil pipeline sits at the bottom of the lake bed, it should be our top priority to have a current inventory of what shoreline resources could be impacted by a pipeline leak. Models have shown that a pipeline spill in the Straits of Mackinac could likely result in oil reaching the shores of Mackinac Island within hours, which would be an absolute catastrophe for Michigan's top tourist attraction.

ESI maps don't just help with oilspill response; they can also be used for coastal development activities, and they even have significant research applications. They provide a clear reference point prior to natural disasters or major storms that may damage, destroy, or significantly alter resources along our coasts. Decision makers at the local and State level may use them for restoration efforts or to make informed decisions about how to balance all of the various uses in that coastal zone.

ESI maps need regular updates in order for them to be truly effective. These updates are happening now for other areas of the country. Stretches of the west coast, along the Gulf of Mexico, and along the east coast have all received updates over the last 5 years.

One region is continually absent from these updates: my home region of the Great Lakes. In fact, the most recent updates for some of the Great Lakes were completed over 20 years ago, but Lake Erie and parts of Lake

Michigan haven't been updated for over 30 years. This bill gives the proper direction and resources to make sure these long overdue updates move forward.

Supporters of the bill so far include the Great Lakes Charter Boat Association, the Coastal States Organization, the Great Lakes Commission, the Alliance for the Great Lakes, the National Wildlife Federation, the Great Lakes Fishery Commission, and the group For Love of Water. With nearly 3,300 miles of coastline in Michigan, the second-most coastline of any State in the Nation, we need to update Great Lakes environmental sensitivity index products as soon as we can.

Modernizing these maps will provide a better picture of what resources could be at risk in the event of a disaster and will be an important tool to help us keep our Great Lakes safe and clean for future generations.

I look forward to working with Senator YOUNG and the rest of my colleagues in the Senate to move this bill forward and make sure that we have the tools we need to make the best decisions for the Great Lakes, no matter the challenges and opportunities facing us.

Thank you.

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, today the Senate will vote on the confirmation of Marvin Kaplan to be a member of the National Labor Relations Board, NLRB. I am glad that we are moving this nomination because the National Labor Relations Board needs to function as intended.

The board hasn't been full in nearly 2 years. I am certainly not the only one of us who thinks a full Board is important. One Democratic senator said at a hearing on May 16, 2013: "I strongly support a fully functioning NLRB with five members. I think confirming the entire slate will ensure that the NLRB is working for American workers and American employers."

Another said at the same hearing: "What we don't need now—the last thing we need here in Washington or across the country—is more rancor, more division, more ideology, at a time we need this Board fully functioning. We need five people to get confirmed here. Any Senator who is standing in the way of getting five people confirmed and having a functioning Board has a lot of explaining to do . . ."

Then-Chairman Harkin said in September 2014: "Keeping the NLRB fully staffed and able to do its work will send a strong message to the American people that yes, Washington can work, and our government can function."

The National Labor Relations Board has five members with 5-year, staggered terms, and a general counsel with a 4-year term. There is no statutory requirement regarding party affiliation, but the tradition has been for the President to appoint members on a 3-2 ratio favoring the administration, with nominations for the two minority seats recommended by the Senate minority leader.

While we may often disagree with the opinions of the nominees for the other party's seats—many of us have ensured they had an up or down vote. For example, since 2013, I have voted for cloture for two board members and the current general counsel who I then voted against confirming.

Marvin Kaplan has been nominated for a position that has sat vacant for 23 months since President Obama declined to nominate a Republican for the then-minority seat. My hope is that this nominee will help restore some balance to the labor board.

After years of playing the role of advocate, the Board should be restored to the role of neutral umpire. Board partisanship didn't start under President Obama, but it became worse under him. When the Board is too partisan, it creates instability in our Nation's workplaces and does not serve the intent of the law—which is stable labor relations and free flow of commerce.

For example, under President Obama, the Board took three harmful actions, including the joint employer decision—which threatened to destroy the American dream for owners of the Nation's 780,000 franchise locations; the ambush elections rule, which can force a union election before an employer and many employees have a chance to figure out what is going on; and the micro-union decision, which gave factions of employees within single stores a path to forming their own unions.

Nominee Marvin Kaplan is currently chief counsel for the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission, where he has served since August 2015. From 2009 to 2015, Kaplan worked as counsel for the House Education and Workforce Committee and the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

Today some Senators have argued about Mr. Kaplan's experience practicing law. I want to note that Mr. Kaplan is in fact well-qualified under the National Labor Relations Act statute. He is an experienced lawyer. He earned his law degree at Washington University in St. Louis and is a member of the New York and New Jersey State bars. The years he has spent considering cases and writing opinions at the Occupational Safety and Health Review Commission, OSHRC, are an excellent preparation for the work of the National Labor Relations Board, NLRB. I will also point out that there have been a number of NLRB members confirmed with limited experience representing clients in labor law matters.

Mr. Kaplan has an admirable record of public service spanning a decade. He could have taken a number of different career paths, but he chose public service, and that should be praised. There is bipartisan respect for Mr. Kaplan.

At a July 2015 business meeting of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, Ranking Member Bobby Scott said this of Mr. Kaplan: "A lot is said about the working relationships around here and how bad

they are from time to time. Staff can contribute to that. I just would like to say that Mr. Kaplan has not been part of that; he's been very cooperative even when you disagree. We have been able to work with my staff, have had good working relationships; a cooperative relationships. I want to add my two cents worth to your congratulations and God speed."

Mr. Kaplan was nominated to be a member of the NLRB on June 20, 2017. We held his hearing on July 13, and he completed all paperwork in accordance with the HELP Committee's rules, practices, and procedures. Our rules require that their HELP paperwork be submitted 5 days before their hearing. We received Mr. Kaplan's HELP paperwork and his Office of Government Ethics, OGE, paperwork on June 26, 17 days before his hearing. Mr. Kaplan also offered to meet with all HELP members. Mr. Kaplan met with 10 of them, including 5 Democrats. Following the hearing, Mr. Kaplan responded to 53 questions for the record, QFRs, or 81 if you include subquestions, and those responses were provided to Senators prior to the markup. The HELP Committee favorably reported out his nomination on July 19.

Recent comparisons show that this process was far from rushed. In comparison, under Chairman Harkin, the HELP Committee held hearings and markups on NLRB nominees with far less time for consideration. For former Board member Kent Hirozawa's seat, which Mr. William Emanuel has been nominated to fill, Mr. Hirozawa's hearing was held 7 days after his nomination, and his markup was held the next day. Former Board member Nancy Schiffer's hearing was held 7 days after her nomination. The HELP Committee also held a markup on her nomination the next day. Committee members were not able to get responses to any QFRs from Kent Hirozawa or Nancy Schiffer before being forced to vote on them.

I look forward to voting for this nominee. I hope the Senate will take up the nomination of William Emanuel, also for the NLRB, very soon, so we have a full board.

Mr. PETERS. I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

VENEZUELA

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, I stand here today to speak about the devastation befalling Venezuela—the people raging in the streets against unfair elections, the dissidents being seized from their homes and detained by security forces, and those starving without food and water.

Venezuela—once one of the most richly resourced countries in Latin

America—is being dismantled by Nicolas Maduro and his flailing Chavista regime. It is a human tragedy impacting more than 30 million people who are literally witnessing society collapse around them.

The numbers, sadly, speak for themselves. According to estimates from the International Monetary Fund, Venezuela's GDP contracted by almost 20 percent last year, with inflation reaching some 550 percent and unemployment spiking to more than 21 percent. The Pharmaceutical Federation of Venezuela estimates that the country suffers from an 85-percent shortage of medicine and a 90-percent deficit of medical supplies, including those needed to treat various types of cancer.

Men and women, young and old, are going hungry. Thanks to Maduro's destruction of the Venezuelan currency, flour, cooking oil, and other basic commodities have disappeared from store shelves. Students and teachers leave their classrooms for hours on end to stand in line, hoping to receive a loaf of bread as a week's meal. The most vulnerable are going on what are called Maduro diets—skipping meals and reducing their food consumption.

And Maduro's response? The would-be dictator is threatening to seize businesses that don't produce enough and has told Venezuelans that doing without makes them tougher. Thousands of Venezuelans have crossed borders in search of food and medicine, while Maduro and his cronies spin conspiracies and rail against phantom enemies on state media. The situation is so dire that the regime has begun "rewarding" some of its most loyal supporters with toilet paper.

Alongside the disintegration of Venezuela's economy is the specter of Maduro's growing dictatorship. We have just witnessed the sham election of a so-called constituent assembly, which Maduro intends to use to try to rewrite Venezuela's Constitution, to crush what is left of its free political institutions, and to consolidate his grip on power. His electoral commission lied about the turnout and downplayed the number of government workers whom the regime pressured to participate. While Maduro preached dialogue on television, his security forces were busy rounding up political opponents and murdering peaceful demonstrators.

This was not Maduro's first power grab. Earlier this year, his handpicked supreme court temporarily dissolved Venezuela's duly-elected National Assembly and stripped its members of immunity in what the head of Organization of American States called a "self-coup." The regime backtracked only after ferocious pressure and condemnation.

But this week's actions make plain Maduro's intent to complete the process begun under his mentor, Hugo Chavez, to transform Venezuela into a full socialistic dictatorship. We have seen that socialism doesn't work. We have

seen the ravages of government control of the economy. The Venezuelan people are suffering, and when combined with dictatorship, it is a toxic mix.

Maduro's actions must not continue unchallenged. I support the Treasury Department's sanctions against senior Venezuelan officials, including Maduro, placing him in the ignominious company of Kim Jong Un and Robert Mugabe. We must keep the pressure on and continue to isolate and delegitimize Maduro's regime, for behind Maduro can be found China, with its billions in infrastructure investments, and Russia, with its growing control over Venezuela's energy sector, and Iran, whose Hezbollah proxy launders money with Maduro's acquiescence.

Yet Maduro is not without opposition. Brave men and women in the tens of thousands have taken to the streets to demand a better future for themselves and their families. Many dozens have been killed by the regime's security forces, and hundreds have been detained. These freedom-loving people represent the best of Venezuela and fearlessly follow in the footsteps of generations of dissidents against Socialist repression.

Just yesterday, Maduro's security forces seized two prominent opposition leaders—Leopoldo Lopez and Antonio Ledezma—for daring to criticize his regime on social media. These two men were carted away in the middle of the night, leaving their loved ones traumatized and frantic without information.

To Lilian and Mitzi, the wives of these two extraordinary men, I want to say that you are two of the strongest people I have ever been blessed to meet. You inspire me. Your husbands' fight inspires me and millions of Americans and people across the globe. I urge you to continue to stand and fight on behalf of your husbands and the many others who are held captive by the Chavista government.

I look forward to welcoming Leopoldo and Antonio back to freedom and, I hope, they will play leading roles leading a free Venezuela, a post-Maduro Venezuela.

Members of my own family have lived through this sort of oppression in Cuba, where a lawless government can raid your home without warning, arbitrarily detain your relatives and neighbors, and ensure that you hardly, if ever, see them again.

To Lilian and Mitzi, I will continue to raise my voice and to call for action—real action—to help Leopoldo, Antonio, and every other Venezuelan willing to stand and risk everything to live in a free and prosperous and democratic country. It is well past time to consign Chavismo to the dustbin of history.

To the millions of Venezuelans waiting in lines for food, clothes, and medicine, struggling with galloping inflation, fearful of Maduro's henchmen detaining their friends and families or gunning them down in the streets, and