

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 President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.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

thinking themselves helpless in the face of their country's decay, you are not alone and should not be afraid.

America and our allies will help see you through this crisis and help you recover. Each new outrage from the Maduro regime only makes our solidarity with you grow. You are strong and Maduro is weak. You are Venezuela's future, and Maduro is its past. You will win, and Maduro will lose.

Venezuela is not the private preserve of a “busdriver turned authoritarian thug in a tracksuit,” but instead Venezuela is a proud and free nation with a glorious past and an even greater future.

Through its words and deeds, the Maduro regime has abandoned what little legitimacy it might have had. When this regime expires, Venezuela will restore its place at the forefront of Latin America and become a good friend and partner to America once again.

We stand with the Venezuelan people as your friend against this socialist oppression, and we tell you that there are brighter days ahead, brighter days of economic cooperation, of energy growth, of abundance of prosperity, of throwing off the shackles of totalitarianism.

Estamos contigo Venezuela, tus mejores días estan por venir.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TOOMEY).

The Senator from New Mexico.

PROTECT CHILDREN, FARMERS, AND FARMWORKERS FROM NERVE AGENT PESTICIDES ACT

Mr. UDALL. Mr. President, this May, a spray of pesticide from a nearby orchard drifted over to a field, exposing nearly 50 farmworkers in California. They soon became sick with nausea and vomiting. Several were hospitalized. The workers described it as a living nightmare.

The chemical they were exposed to is called chlorpyrifos, a neurotoxic pesticide related to sarin gas. It has been in use since it was developed by Dow Chemical over 50 years ago. Today, it is most often used on fruits and nuts, including strawberries, citrus, apples, and pecans from my home State of New Mexico. It is also used on grains and vegetables like broccoli and cauliflower.

A few years ago, Bonnie Wirtz also experienced the effects of chlorpyrifos. Bonnie is a farmer in Minnesota. She was exposed when spray drift came into her home through the air-conditioner. Her heart started racing, almost to the point of cardiac arrest, and she couldn't breathe. At the hospital, her nurse practitioner told her she wasn't surprised. She had seen others with similar reactions.

About 10 years ago, Claudia Angulo—a farmworker in California's San Joaquin Valley—was exposed to chlorpyrifos when she was pregnant. Claudia worked sorting oranges, apples, broccoli, and other produce treated with the chemical. When her son Isaac was born with a mental disability

and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, she suspected the pesticides she was exposed to.

A few years ago, European scientists tested some of Isaac's hair. He had traces of over 50 pesticides in his body, and the highest concentration was chlorpyrifos. It has long been known that exposure to chlorpyrifos can be deadly. After years of study, researchers in the United States and a number of other countries now believe there is a strong connection between chlorpyrifos exposure and mental disability, ADHD, and memory deficit in children. They believe the chemical damages children's developing brains, even if they are exposed before birth. Latino children, whose parents are exposed to the pesticide, and grow up near fields treated with it, are at the greatest risk.

Scientists believe the pesticide poses a threat even to children exposed to it from produce from the grocery store or through drinking water. The connection is so strong that scientists at the Environmental Protection Agency recommended that the EPA ban all uses of the pesticide in 2015. The agency had already negotiated a ban on household use 15 years ago.

This March, the EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt ignored his own scientists and the body of scientific evidence that chlorpyrifos is dangerous. Instead, he reversed course and refused to ban chlorpyrifos. That is why I rise to talk about this danger to our children.

When moms and dads feed fruits and vegetables to their children, they are trying to do the right thing. They shouldn't have to worry that these foods are laced with dangerous nerve agents. They shouldn't have to worry that the farmworkers who picked that produce or the farmers living near it were exposed.

I have been part of the fight to protect public health and the environment from toxic chemicals most of my life. I remember when Rachel Carson published “Silent Spring” in 1962. My father, Stewart Udall, was her champion when she was fiercely attacked by the chemical industry.

Just over a year ago, I led the bipartisan effort to reform the broken Toxic Substances Control Act. I spent several years working to reform how the EPA regulates chemicals, fighting to stand up a credible program that could be respected, that could restore confidence in the EPA on chemical safety.

I am very disappointed to have to do this, to introduce a bill on a related matter, pesticide regulation. Normally, I would argue that Congress should stay out of the business of regulating individual chemicals. That is why the EPA was created, to make thoughtful, science-based decisions on issues that affect public health and the economy.

In his first decision at the EPA, the administrator has shown his hand. He did not respect the science, not even his own scientific team, and not even when the science is overwhelmingly de-

cisive. If the EPA and this administration will not act to protect the public, to protect children, then Congress must.

I have studied the case for banning chlorpyrifos. There is no question it needs to come off the market. In this situation, I believe Congress must step in to protect children's health. That is why I have introduced the Protect Children, Farmers, and Farmworkers from Nerve Agent Pesticides Act—to do what the EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt refuses to do: ban chlorpyrifos.

Let's look at the reasons for banning chlorpyrifos. There are three very good ones. There are three reasons, I believe, this bill is necessary. First, Administrator Pruitt is wrong. The science is established that chlorpyrifos is a threat to health in its current use. The EPA has studied and studied the toxicity of chlorpyrifos for over a decade. I have talked to the scientists who have been studying it for over 30 years.

In a December 2014 risk assessment, the EPA found chlorpyrifos caused unsafe drinking water contamination. Based on that assessment, the EPA formally proposed, in November 2015, to revoke the use of chlorpyrifos on food. As recently as December 2016, the EPA reaffirmed its determination.

The pesticide is intended to act on the nervous system of insects, but it can act on the human nervous system as well. It can cause immediate symptoms like nausea, vomiting, convulsions, respiratory paralysis—as Bonnie Wirtz and farmworkers in California experienced. In extreme cases, it can kill.

More worrisome, even low-level exposure of chlorpyrifos to developing fetuses in young children can interrupt the development processes of the nervous system. Exposure during gestation or childhood is linked with lower birth weight, slower motor development, and attention problems.

Long-lasting effects on child brain development from in utero exposure also include impaired perceptual reasoning and working memory and undetermined intellectual development by age 7. Exposure to organophosphate pesticides like chlorpyrifos is associated with changes in children's cognitive, behavioral, and motor performance. In plain English, chlorpyrifos damages children's brains.

Second, chlorpyrifos was one of the most widely used household insecticides until the EPA raised concerns in 2000–17 years ago. Household use was phased out. That same year, the EPA discontinued use of chlorpyrifos on tomatoes altogether and restricted its uses on apples and grapes. Currently, chlorpyrifos is still widely used in agriculture, but its use is on the decline.

In 2012, EPA required no-spray buffers around schools, homes, play fields, daycare centers, hospitals, and other public places. Growers are already working to find alternatives.

The third reason is, scientists, doctors, advocates, I, and many of our colleagues were shocked when Administrator Pruitt changed course on chlorpyrifos in March, choosing to wait until 2022—5 years from now.

The American Academy of Pediatrics wrote a letter to Administrator Pruitt in June telling him that “EPA has no new evidence indicating that chlorpyrifos exposures are safe.” As a result, EPA has no basis to allow continued use of chlorpyrifos, and its insistence on doing so puts all children at risk.

The science hasn’t changed since the EPA proposed to ban chlorpyrifos in 2015 and in 2016. Only the politics have.

The law should protect Americans from unsafe pesticides. Under the Food Quality Protection Act, the EPA Administrator “may establish or leave in effect a tolerance for a pesticide chemical residue in or on food only if the Administrator determines that the tolerance is safe.”

“Safe” means . . . that there is a reasonable certainty that no harm will [come] from aggregate exposure.”

If the Administrator can’t determine that a pesticide is safe, the Administrator must revoke or modify the tolerance.

In the case of chlorpyrifos, Administrator Pruitt did not determine the pesticide is safe with reasonable certainty, nor could he. Instead, he hid behind his claim that the issue requires years more study.

This issue has been the subject of litigation for many years. When the EPA asked the Federal court overseeing the lawsuit for a mere 6-month extension for more study, the court gave a resounding no. It called the request “another variation on the theme of ‘partial reports, missed deadlines, and vague promises of future action’ that has been repeated for the last nine years.”

The EPA Administrator has now given himself a 5-year extension. He is failing to follow the Food Quality Protection Act, and he is tying up the Federal Government in more unnecessary and wasteful taxpayer-funded litigation. In the meantime, children, farmers, and farmworkers are at risk because the Administrator refuses to follow the law.

It doesn’t stop there. Administrator Pruitt wants to dismantle protections for farmworkers. The EPA is proposing to delay two rules vital to protecting our Nation’s farmworkers: The agricultural worker protection standard and the certificate of pesticide applicators rule. Farmworkers have one of the highest rates of chemical exposure among U.S. workers. They are regularly exposed to pesticides. Despite the urgent need to protect them and their families, they actually are less protected than other workers.

We don’t know exactly why Administrator Pruitt is choosing to believe a chemical company over respected scientists at his own Agency and around

the world, but we can follow the money and guess one reason. While the President and the Administrator ignore science and the law, they have not ignored Dow Chemical Company. Dow gave the President \$1 million for his inauguration. Its CEO attended the signing ceremony when the President issued his Executive order requiring agencies to roll back what he called unnecessary regulations. The CEO even got the signing pen. And the CEO met with Administrator Pruitt shortly before the order not to ban one of Dow’s big moneymakers.

Administrator Pruitt may choose to put aside science, public health, and environmental protection in favor of big chemical profits, but Congress should not. I urge all of my colleagues, especially those across the aisle, to stand with me and pass this protection for children, families, farmers, and farmworkers.

I thank my cosponsors and the co-sponsors who are coming aboard every day: Senators BLUMENTHAL, BOOKER, DURBIN, GILLIBRAND, HARRIS, MARKEY, MERKLEY, and CARDIN.

There have been many public health and labor groups that have stood up on this issue—just to name some of them today: National Hispanic Medical Association, Learning Disabilities Association of America, Farmworker Justice, Project TENDR, United Farm Workers, Earthjustice, GreenLatinos, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, LULAC, National Resources Defense Council, Environmental Working Group, Pesticide Action Network, Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, Mana, and others.

The pesticide registration information act is currently moving through Congress. This gives Congress the opportunity to address chlorpyrifos use and worker protection. This bill is a good start for those discussions.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. GARDNER). The Senator from Connecticut.

VETERANS LEGISLATION

Mr. BLUMENTHAL. Mr. President, sometimes bipartisanship and comity do work. They have in the last 24 and 48 hours on two measures that are critically important to help our Nation’s veterans have access to benefits and healthcare that they vitally need, that they deserve, and that they have earned. Those measures relate to appeals reform and to the Choice Program.

Last night the Senate passed by unanimous consent—which means without any objection—H.R. 2288, the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017.

I am proud to have worked on this measure with the chairman of the VA Committee, Senator ISAKSON, when I was the ranking member of that committee during the last session. I thank him for his leadership, his vision, and his commitment to this very important cause.

This bipartisan measure now goes to the President. It provides a significant step toward securing benefits veterans have earned. Once these reforms are fully funded—and they should be—our Nation’s veterans will no longer be bogged down by a cumbersome, time-consuming, irksome, and, in fact, aggravating process that denies them fair and full consideration when they appeal their claim’s denial. This reform will begin—it is only a beginning—a better system involving transparency and communication for veterans and their families.

As ranking member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, I heard testimony that the Department of Veterans Affairs’ appeals process desperately needs updating and reform. We all in this body have heard from our constituents again and again and again about the antiquated delay and burdensome process that exists today. The average wait time on an appeal today is 5 years. Let me repeat that. The average wait time on an appeal is 5 years. Nearly half a million veterans are caught in a quagmire—often a quicksand—of repeated consideration, unable to claim benefits because of the VA’s existing backlog.

Between fiscal year 2015 and fiscal year 2017, the number of pending appeals increased from about 380,000 to 470,000. That is an increase of more than 20 percent. The increase in those appeals was the “bad news” side of improvements in the process to consider the initial appeal. There were more appeals because more claims were disposed of, but that is no excuse for that kind of delay in appeals.

We worked with the VA and veterans groups to devise a new appeals system that allows veterans to choose an option that is right for them. The bill that passed yesterday will create three separate paths. They can choose among them for veterans seeking redress from a decision by the Veterans Benefits Administration. This reform is vitally important because it gives Secretary Shulkin the authority to test the new system before its full implementation.

I know it will take time to implement these changes. It should take less time than is predicted because the Veterans Administration owes it to our heroes—the men and women who have served and sacrificed for our Nation. My constituent caseworkers in Hartford have tried to assist many individual veterans with their claims, and these efforts must continue around the country in all of our offices even as these new reforms are implemented.

The second area where we joined together in a bipartisan way relates to the Choice Program. We have agreed to continue funding by providing \$2.1 billion and authorizing 28 new leases for medical facilities across the country to improve access to the high-quality care provided at VA hospitals. Make no mistake, this action is a down payment, not the final word. I am going to continue to champion further reforms to