

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 money makers.

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 cosponsors 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

make sure we improve VA healthcare and enhance access to VA medical facilities.

I am particularly concerned by recent findings made by the VA inspector general, Michael Missal, about a troubling lack of health information sharing between VA and non-VA providers relating to chronic pain treatment. To put it very simply and bluntly, the lack of information sharing makes opioid addiction far more likely than it should be, especially among veterans who seek care from private providers through the Choice system.

Connecticut was one of the first States in the country to have a statewide prescription drug monitoring program. I urged Secretary Shulkin at a hearing last year to make sure the VA prescription drug monitoring program exchanges information with the State system, which has data from private providers. The sharing of information is vital to prevent doctor shopping and excessive prescriptions. Without it, veterans potentially are susceptible to weaknesses and gaps that enable them to seek excessive prescriptions of opioid pain killer treatment that can lead to addiction and worse.

We cannot allow the Veterans Choice Program to exacerbate opioid addiction. We must do everything we can to stop the opioid epidemic that is ravaging our communities. As Senator MANCHIN of West Virginia and other colleagues have made clear, the VA must close the information gap on opioid prescriptions through improved opioid safety initiative guidelines and enhanced prescription drug monitoring programs. While we work in Congress to reform the Choice Program, I call on the VA to immediately take certain commonsense steps, none of them novel or original. They have been identified by the inspector general:

First, require all participating VA Purchased Care providers to receive and review evidence-based guidelines for prescribing opioids.

Second, implement a process to ensure all Purchased Care consults for non-VA care include a complete, up-to-date list of medications and medical history.

Third, require non-VA providers to submit opioid prescriptions directly to a VA pharmacy for dispensing and recording in the patient's VA electronic health record.

Fourth, ensure that if facility leaders determine that a non-VA provider's opioid prescribing practices conflict with the guidelines, immediate action is taken to ensure the safety of all veterans receiving care from that non-VA provider.

These are basic protections for our veterans. They are protections against overprescribing opioids or negligent misconduct—and worse—on the part of non-VA providers and others.

My hope is that we are beginning on a path to better information sharing between those prescription drug monitoring programs at the State level for

non-VA providers and the VA facilities and providers who care for our veterans directly. That information sharing is not a luxury or convenience; it is a necessity.

We must help veterans of every era with their need for prompt appeals dispositions and effective healthcare that also protects them from opioid addiction. I am hopeful the Senate will quickly pass the Harry Walker Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act, which has been unanimously approved by the House, to make comprehensive improvements to the GI bill. I helped to draft this measure and lead it, and I am proud the House has approved it.

We must also help veterans of all eras suffering from toxic exposure and make sure we award a Congressional Gold Medal to the American Legion and make USERRA protections for our servicemembers meaningful and enforceable. These steps are part of an unfinished agenda that we owe our veterans. We cannot shirk that duty. We cannot postpone it. It is an obligation, not a convenience.

I look forward to moving forward with these efforts, as we have done with Choice and with the appeals reform, and to learning what we know already—that we can work together across the aisle when it comes to keeping faith with our veterans and making sure that no veteran of any era is left behind.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Arkansas.

TRIBUTE TO BILL REED

Mr. BOOZMAN. Mr. President, I rise today to recognize Bill Reed, an Arkansan who is retiring after more than 34 years of dedicated service at Riceland Foods, the world's largest miller and marketer of rice.

Bill is a member of the company's senior management team whose responsibilities include government affairs, public relations, and the Riceland Sustainability Initiative. His interest in agriculture at a young age led him to pursue degrees in this field. Bill earned a bachelor's degree with honors in plant and soil science from the University of Tennessee and a master's degree in agricultural journalism from the University of Wisconsin.

In 1976, he moved to the Natural State to work as a State specialist with the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. He has continued his commitment not only to Arkansas but to Arkansas agriculture for more than 40 years.

Bill is recognized as one of the most passionate advocates on behalf of the Arkansas rice industry. Bill is constantly looking out for the rice farmers and businesses by promoting policies to grow the industry and pushing for expanding markets. His advocacy extended beyond the boundaries of agriculture. He was always ready to lend a hand to me or to my staff on any issue important to Arkansas.

He shares his passion for agriculture throughout the State, country, and the world as a representative of Riceland on numerous boards and trade associations, including the USA Rice Federation and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives. In addition, Bill serves as chairman of the Associated Industries of Arkansas, vice president for agriculture of the Arkansas State Council on Economic Education, and vice chairman of the board of visitors of Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas.

He is a faithful servant of Jesus Christ and is leading his life as Christ calls us to do. In recent years, Bill began seminary school, and his retirement from Riceland will allow him to pursue the ministry full time and help people in need.

I appreciate Bill's friendship, and I am confident that he will excel in this role, just as he had done as an advocate for Arkansas rice. I wish him well in all of his future endeavors and look forward to the great work he will continue to do in helping the great State of Arkansas.

I yield the floor.

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

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

LEGISLATIVE SESSION

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to legislative session and that following my remarks the Senate resume executive session as under the previous order.

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

AFG AND SAFER PROGRAM REAUTHORIZATION ACT OF 2017

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the immediate consideration of Calendar No. 168, S. 829.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will report the bill by title.

The senior assistant legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 829) to reauthorize the Assistance to Firefighters Grants program, the Fire Prevention and Safety Grants program, and the Staffing for Adequate Fire and Emergency Response grant program, and for other purposes.

There being no objection, the Senate proceeded to consider the bill, which had been reported from the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, with an amendment to strike all after the enacting clause and insert in lieu thereof the following:

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This Act may be cited as the "AFG and SAFER Program Reauthorization Act of 2017".