

a State, like the Presiding Officer's, where there are a lot of hunters. It is a proud tradition in Minnesota so I look at all these proposals and I say to myself: Does this hurt my Uncle Dick and his deer stand? For many of the ones I have looked at, the answer is clearly no, including the background check bill.

When I talk to law enforcement in my State, they stress the need to have effective background checks to stop felons, people with severe mental illnesses, and others prohibited under current law from accessing guns. These efforts do not have to infringe in any way on Americans' lawful right to own guns.

Another sensible measure is Senator FEINSTEIN's legislation to close a loophole that allows bump stop devices to convert semiautomatic firearms into weapons that work like fully automatic guns. Law enforcement officers have now recovered 12 of these devices from the Las Vegas shooter's room. I am a cosponsor of that bill, and I am encouraged that some of my Republican colleagues have agreed to look at this.

I hope we can find a path forward in the weeks ahead, not only with regard to this particular focus, the bump stock device legislation, but also on some of the other bills like the background check bill.

#### HEALTHCARE

Mr. President, I am here for another purpose today; that is, that we must get to work on other important business in the Senate. We need to reauthorize the Children's Health Insurance Program and come together on bipartisan fixes to the Affordable Care Act. No parent should ever have to worry whether their child will have healthcare, but funding for the Children's Health Insurance Program, or CHIP, expired over this weekend. CHIP is one of the great bipartisan success stories. Both parties have come together to support a program that provides healthcare to millions of children.

In Minnesota, these funds support coverage for 125,000 children. I heard from the children's hospitals and clinics of Minnesota just last week about many of the families who count on this program. While States like mine are finding ways to make Federal funding last a bit longer, since ours has already expired, every single day Congress doesn't act puts coverage of millions of children at risk.

There is already bipartisan work underway to keep this program going. Senator HATCH and Senator WYDEN have introduced a bipartisan bill to extend CHIP for 5 years. In 2015, the last time we renewed this program, it passed the Senate with 92 votes—92 out of 100 votes. We should demonstrate that same bipartisan spirit again. The children in America are counting on us. We must act before it is too late or States like mine may be forced to make difficult choices about insurance

coverage for some of our more vulnerable constituents.

CHIP is one part of our healthcare system that is working. We should be doing everything in our power to protect it. So let's come together and pass this long-term reauthorization of CHIP.

Mr. President, CHIP is not the only area where we should be able to come together on healthcare. The American people want us to work together on bipartisan fixes to the Affordable Care Act. As I said the day it passed, it was a beginning and not an end. Any major piece of legislation like that needs improvements and changes. Let's work together on the bipartisan bills and ideas that have been put forward. Just like my friend Senator MCCAIN said, we could do better working together—Republicans and Democrats.

Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY have been holding hearings and discussions on commonsense solutions to bring down insurance costs over the past month. We had Governors here, and there were actually more Republican Governors in the room than Democratic Governors, as they embraced these suggested changes which include reinsurance. I note Senator COLLINS and Senator NELSON, a Republican and a Democrat, have a bill together that would do something on that front.

I look at what has been done in Alaska—I see my colleague, Senator MURKOWSKI here—and what has been done in Minnesota when it comes to reinsurance, and we have seen some of the rates go down, not to where we need them to go, but there has been a decrease in the amount of rates. We would like to see that on a national basis, and that is why I am such a strong supporter of Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY's work.

Mr. President, finally, we need to be doing something on the skyrocketing cost of prescription drugs. People such as Kim from Plymouth, MN, is struggling to afford her insulin because it has gone up three times. She keeps the injector with a few drops of insulin from day-to-day so she can get by. That is why I think we should have Medicare Part D negotiations. I have a bill that now has 33 cosponsors that lifts the ban that makes it illegal for 41 million seniors to negotiate the prices of drugs. Seniors can be a pretty stubborn and very vocal group. Why don't we let them unleash their power and allow Medicaid to negotiate prices?

Senator GRASSLEY and I have a bill to stop pay for delay, where major pharmaceutical companies are paying off generics to keep their products off the market. I have a bill with Senator GRASSLEY, Senator LEAHY, and Senator LEE—the four of us lead the bill—the CREATES Act, which makes it easier to get more generic competition in the market. We also—MCCAIN and I, and Senator LEE and I—have bills that allow for safe drugs to come in from other countries to again create more

competition to bring the price down. When the prices of four of the top best selling drugs in America have gone up over 100 percent, I don't think we can just sit here and do nothing anymore.

I bring up these efforts because, for the most part, they are bipartisan—the work of Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY, the bills that have been introduced to do something on prescription drugs. Let's get moving on that and let's reauthorize CHIP. The last time it passed the Senate with 92 votes.

Thank you.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Alaska.

#### UNANIMOUS CONSENT REQUEST—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 323, 324, 325; that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc, with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table en bloc; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nominations be printed in the RECORD.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Mr. INHOFE. I object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

Ms. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, it is my hope that we will be able to come to agreement with regard to the nominees whom I have just asked for consideration. These are individuals who have been moved out of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to be named to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. This is a Commission that has been without a functioning quorum for months on end. They have just recently been able to achieve that quorum, but they are not yet to a full complement.

We worked hard to reach an agreement with colleagues so these names could advance so the FERC could get to work in an expeditious manner. There is much to be considered. The work that has piled up, that has cost our economy, that has cost our country over these many months, as we have seen these delays when you don't have a functioning FERC, has been considerable. We want to try to reach agreement, but I am disappointed that we are not going to be able to advance them this afternoon.

With that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Oregon.

#### WILDFIRE FUNDING

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, 4 weeks ago, I stood here on the floor of the Senate and called for increased funding to fight the wildfires. This is just one of the dramatic pictures of Oregon ablaze. It is thousands and thousands of acres.

I had the experience of driving roughly 350 miles in my State and never escaping the smoke from the fires that were in every single corner and in every quadrant of the State of Oregon. We have seen the challenge of Mother Nature at work this year with Hurricanes Harvey, Irma, and Maria hitting in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico. But let's not forget the incredible damage being done in Montana, Idaho, Oregon, and Washington by these extraordinary fires.

Over the last decade, we have seen an average of 50,000 fires in America each year. They destroy and burn up more than 5 million acres, but this year the count is well over 8 million acres and counting. In Oregon, we normally have fires that burn, on average, about 500,000 acres, but this year we are well over 600,000 acres and counting.

As a result of these raging fires, we have many communities that have been so powerfully impacted and so many forests destructively impacted. We should stop and ask: What can we do better in terms of our forests and our communities? That is why I am taking to the floor right now.

The first thing we need to do is to end fire borrowing. This is where the U.S. Forest Service, in order to pay for fighting these fires, proceeds to borrow from every other account. This has become all too common. What are those other accounts? They are the hazardous fuels funds, forest management funds, forest restoration funds, forest conservation funds, road maintenance funds, and funds that are designed to prepare for future timber sales.

All of that does a lot of damage to the preparation. So the fires are more resilient and aren't susceptible to this type of firefighting. We have seen, on average in the last decade, a cost of fighting fires across the country of about \$1.6 billion. But this year, we are over \$3 billion—almost double. So even though the Appropriations Committee had wisely put in a buffer of several hundred million dollars to prevent fire borrowing, those funds were long ago wiped out.

So there we were 4 weeks ago. I was working to say that now that we are over the allotted funds for the year, let's immediately get more funds that can be used to backfill this shortage in September. I thank all of my colleagues for the fact that those funds were included in the continuing resolution. We successfully provided a bridge so that firefighting could continue and so that the fire borrowing was quickly repaid.

But that is not a permanent solution—to try to legislate or to backfill on a rapid basis. Indeed, when we have these kinds of fire seasons, it is like other natural disasters. It is like tornadoes and hurricanes and floods. So we need to have a FEMA-style backup for those worst ever fire seasons. That is what my colleagues Senator WYDEN and Senator CRAPO—bipartisan teamwork—have been putting forth. It is

called the Wildfire Disaster Funding Act of 2017. It says that when we reach a certain level of funding for fighting fires, the balance will go to a FEMA-style fund. That is exactly the way it should be done.

It has been estimated in the past that if just the top 1 percent or 2 percent of the worst fires were funded in FEMA-style fund, we would never have had fire borrowing in the past. But the most relevant kind of crisp and clean way to do that would be to adopt this bill Senator WYDEN and Senator CRAPO have put so much work into and which I am certainly pleased to cosponsor. That would be very useful, and we should do that now.

We should respond while the memory is fresh and, actually, while fires are still burning in State after State—certainly burning in my home State of Oregon. Then we should recognize, too, that this terrible fire year has done so much damage to so many communities. We have communities where the roads have been cut off. We have communities where the tourists disappeared because of the smoke, or other economic enterprises had to shut down for an extended period.

So as we assist those communities hit by Harvey and hit by Irma and hit by Maria, let's also help those communities that were hit by this year's extraordinary fires. That would mean strengthening the Small Business Disaster Loan Program. That would mean taking the additional funding for the USDA Emergency Community Water Assistance Program, and, certainly, it would mean making additional community development block grants available to the communities impacted by these fires. Let's not forget those communities as we provide assistance in funding to the communities affected by the hurricanes.

Then we also need to address the fact that many assets in our forests were scorched by these fires. There are trails that have to be repaired, roads that have to be repaired, watershed repairs to avoid landslides, facilities that were scorched and burned, and wildlife and fish management restoration, including critical sage grouse areas.

I was up visiting the incredible waterfall, the Multnomah Falls. They were explaining that several of the trails have bridges—there are so many bridges on the trails in Oregon—and that the fire had burned some of the understructure. So from above it looked like the bridges were safe, but they weren't safe. They can't reopen those trails until they get support to do all these repairs. The Forest Service has estimated that it will take \$150 million to restore the damage done to the Forest Service's infrastructure.

So we should make that happen as part of this bill. Then, we should turn to forest fire resilience. We have 2 million acres in need of fire prevention efforts in Oregon. Actually, we have far more of that in need of fire prevention, but we have nearly 2 million that have

already passed through environmental approval for work to reduce the hazardous fuels that are on the floor of the forest, and we need to thin these forests.

You can imagine that when you have clearcuts and those clearcuts are replanted, the trees grow back very close together. In a short amount of time, those forests are very good for fires and very good for disease, but they are neither good for ecosystems nor for timber stands. So they have to be thinned, and that thinning can be done, in Oregon alone, on nearly 2 million acres already approved through the environmental process. The challenge is to get more funds into that effort.

That, too, should be part of this because, whether you talk to an environmentalist or talk to somebody who wants sawlogs for the mills, they both know that if you thin these forests, you make them more resistant to fire. With better timber stands, you have better ecosystems, and you supply a steady supply of sawlogs to the mill.

Let's not reopen the timber wars of the past. Let's work together with a win-win.

I want to show this chart because it indicates the dramatic change of what has happened to the Forest Service budget. We can go back to 1995 and compare it to the year 2015. I want to focus particularly on the orange. The orange is the amount of money that was spent fighting forest fires, and 20 years ago, it was 16 percent of the Forest Service budget. But in 2015—2 years ago—it broke 50 percent. It was 52 percent of their budget. This year, it has certainly gone up much higher than that. So as the amount of funds spent on fighting fires has increased, it has dramatically reduced the amount of funds that support our maintenance and improvement of the forest. That is what is getting squeezed out.

Let me put it differently. The more you spend fighting fires out of a single pot of money, the less money you have to prevent the fires. Everywhere I go they say: Can't we do more on the front end so these forests are more resilient? If you think about how fire works, it really gets going if the trees are close together because one tree lights the next tree on fire. If you thin them, you slow that down. The fire goes from the ground, where there is brush, to the canopy, where there are branches, very easily if the branches are close to the ground. So you trim off those branches, separate the trees, thin them out, shave off the branches, cut off the branches, and suddenly you have a forest that is much more resilient.

There are those folks who have said: Let's just get rid of the environmental rules. Let's just clearcut everything. Let's do 10,000 acres at a time. That is, by the way, 15 square miles. Let's set those 15 square miles next to each other. Let's just shave the Earth and wipe out the forests. That way, there will not be forest fires. Those are the timber wars of the past.

What we have seen is that we can bridge the divide between a good ecosystem and a good timber stand by thinning the forest, by making them more like a natural forest, which is much more fire resilient. In the process of thinning, which has to be done periodically over time, we are also providing a steady foundation for sawlogs for our mills.

There is a mill in John Day, OR. I met with the folks there who were very worried. The workers there were very worried about that mill getting shut down. I was determined to do everything I could to save that mill. What ended up happening is that we found we couldn't save that mill with a timber sale because a timber sale can't commit to a load of logs over a 10-year period. The owner of the mill couldn't commit to the cost of new machinery if he didn't know he would get logs for an extended period of time. So we discovered that we could, though, through a forest health contract—through a stewardship contract—enable a steady supply of thinned logs to make it to that mill and make sure that mill stayed open. Not only did it keep it open, but it added workers to that mill. That is the type of win-win solution that we need.

There is another way of looking at the cost of fighting fires. Here we see, in 1995, 16 percent of the budget going to fight fires; in 2017, 56 percent. Let's look into the future. An original estimate was that we would reach 67 percent by 2025; now the new estimate, based on the changing dynamics in the forest, is that we will get to over two-thirds of the budget fighting fires by the year 2021—four fire seasons from today. That is how big the issue is. That is why we need funds from the front end to be able to thin these forests. This is simply common sense.

If you are the private owner of a private forest, you wouldn't dare let this forest retain this high propensity for fires and disease. You would thin the forest. You would make it a better timber stand; you would make it a better ecosystem. And that is what we need to do.

We have also seen that another way of looking at the changes is how the staffing levels have changed over the last two decades. If we look at just two decades ago, we can see that in 1998 there were about 18,000 individuals dedicated to managing the forest lands and just 5,700 dedicated to going out and fighting blazes. Now we have come into the future, and we see now that the number of people fighting fires is larger than the number working on all of the other forest programs. We have to commit to doing far more on the prevention end. If we let this summer's crisis go without securing funding to thin those forests that have already gone through the environmental process, we are making a huge mistake, and it is going to cost us more because there are going to be even more fires in the future. So not only do we spend

more out of the National Treasury to fight them, but we will have less healthy timber stands to fuel our economy.

Let's end the fire burn. Let's provide the funding to restore the fire service assets that were burned, the scourged assets. Let's provide assistance through community development block grants and small business loans to assist the communities that were scourged by these fires. Let's pass Senator WYDEN and Senator CRAPO's bill, which proceeds to create a FEMA-like structure to back up the worst fire seasons, and certainly, certainly, absolutely, let's invest in prevention on the front end by thinning these forests and getting the flammable buildup of forest branches off the floor of the forests. Those are positive things we can do.

At this moment in Houston, in Miami, in Puerto Rico, people are thinking, what can we do to better prepare for the next storm surge? What can we do to be better prepared for the next hurricane? Well, we know for sure that we are going to have fires across the Northwest in Montana, in Idaho, in Oregon, in Washington every summer, and they are simply getting worse. We must ask ourselves the same question: How do we change this rhythm? How do we operate this differently and better? That is our responsibility in this Chamber, and that is the set of things we can do to have a far better outcome in the future.

I urge all of my colleagues to support these five efforts as we support funding for Texas and Florida and Puerto Rico. Thank you.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BLUNT). The majority leader is recognized.

#### UNANIMOUS CONSENT AGREEMENT—EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that following leader remarks on Tuesday, October 17, the Senate proceed to the consideration of Calendar No. 191, the nomination of David Trachtenberg to be Principal Deputy Under Secretary of Defense. I further ask that there be 10 minutes of debate on the nomination equally divided in the usual form; that following the use or yielding back of time, the Senate vote on confirmation with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table, and the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action.

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

#### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 327, 332, 333, and 337.

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

The clerk will report the nominations en bloc.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of Stephen B. King, of Wisconsin, to be Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the United States of America to the Czech Republic; BARBARA LEE, of California, to be Representative of the United States of America to the Seventy-second Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations; CHRISTOPHER SMITH, of New Jersey, to be Representative of the United States of America to the Seventy-second Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations; and J. Steven Dowd, of Florida, to be United States Director of the African Development Bank for a term of five years.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table en bloc; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nominations be printed in the RECORD.

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

Is there any further debate on the nominations en bloc?

If not, the question is, will the Senate advise and consent to the King, Lee, Smith, and Dowd nominations en bloc?

The nominations were confirmed en bloc.

#### EXECUTIVE CALENDAR

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to the en bloc consideration of the following nominations: Executive Calendar Nos. 365, 366, and 367.

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

The clerk will report the nominations en bloc.

The legislative clerk read the nominations of Timothy Gallaudet, of California, to be Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Oceans and Atmosphere; Howard R. Elliott, of Indiana, to be Administrator of the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration. Department of Transportation and Walter G. Copan, of Colorado, to be Under Secretary of Commerce for Standards and Technology.

Thereupon, the Senate proceeded to consider the nominations en bloc.

Mr. McCONNELL. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate vote on the nominations en bloc with no intervening action or debate; that if confirmed, the motions to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table en bloc; that the President be immediately notified of the Senate's action; that no further motions be in order; and that any statements relating to the nominations be printed in the RECORD.