

Now it looks as though other predators are circling. News came out this week that a small, two-person company in Whitefish, MT, somehow, some way, got a no-bid \$300 million contract to restore power in Puerto Rico from the island's power authority—the same power authority that refused the help of experienced electric companies that actually know how to turn the power back on. How does something like this happen? It turns out that the little town in Montana is the home of the new Secretary of the Interior.

Get ready, because this is just the start. President Trump and his billionaire cronies are going to use this disaster to enrich themselves. The Whitefish power contract given to a friend of the Secretary of Interior—with two people employed at that company—is just a scratch on the surface of what is to come.

Puerto Rico has been getting screwed for decades. None of this is new. None of this is unpredictable. If you think this is just one century-long string of rough luck, you are ignoring the last critical aspect of Puerto Rican history.

Back in 1901, when the U.S. Supreme Court decided that even though residents of the territories lived in the United States, they shouldn't be able to enjoy full constitutional protections, the Supreme Court was pretty explicit about why these citizens in places like Puerto Rico deserved this second-class treatment. Justice Henry Brown, who authored the separate but equal doctrine, held that Puerto Rico and the other territories didn't need to be afforded full rights under the Constitution because the islands were "inhabited by alien races, differing from us in religion, customs, laws, methods of taxation, and modes of thought." That, my friends, is racism defined. And it is both past and present when it comes to the rationale for the historical and continued mistreatment of the people of Puerto Rico.

It is time for that mistreatment to change—not just by doing right by Puerto Rico at this moment, at their hour of need. Yes, it is time for President Trump to command that FEMA and the U.S. military and the powers that be in Puerto Rico turn the lights back on right now. Congress should give Puerto Rico every cent they need.

I am glad that we came together this week to approve the latest round of emergency aid, but it is long past time that we addressed the second-class treatment we have given the people of Puerto Rico for decades. Even that racist 1901 Supreme Court decision contemplated that the territories' unequal status could only be justified temporarily. It is time to untie the hands of the Puerto Rican people and ensure that they have full economic and political rights.

I hope my colleagues will join me in this conversation in the coming months. It is just as important as the one we are having on emergency response because if anything good can

come from the disaster of Hurricane Maria, maybe it is that.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Mexico.

HEALTHCARE

Mr. UDALL. Madam President, Republicans have spent months trying to repeal the Affordable Care Act. They knew that tens of millions of Americans would lose their care, they knew it would betray our Federal trust responsibility to Native Americans, and they knew it would throw one-fifth of our economy into chaos. TrumpCare failed because the American people opposed it. Americans spoke out against it in record numbers. TrumpCare failed to pass four times. We hope that now we have put that to bed and we can move on.

But rather than listening to millions of Americans, President Trump has responded by sabotaging the Affordable Care Act. His reckless behavior is already causing chaos in the marketplace. His actions have hiked up the cost of premiums. He has sent out-of-pocket costs through the roof. Instead of helping Americans get better healthcare, he has put it out of reach for millions.

I commend my colleagues Senator ALEXANDER and Senator MURRAY. They have found a bipartisan solution to this new healthcare crisis caused by our President. I urge Leader McCONNELL to put it onto the floor.

The Affordable Care Act isn't the only healthcare program at risk. The President and Republicans are letting funds run dry for other critical health programs. Last month, the Children's Health Insurance Program expired. CHIP insures almost 9 million children across the country, including over 11,000 kids in my home State of New Mexico. The Community Health Centers Program also expired last month.

Republicans failed to extend the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Services. That is one of the most effective health programs that we have. Without it, more than 1,000 New Mexico parents could miss out on home visits. They will not get crucial information about how to nurse their newborns, recognize healthy behavior in infants, and teach basic skills to their children. The Special Diabetes Program for Indians is also set to expire in December.

I urge Republicans to work with us to reauthorize these critical healthcare programs. We need to act urgently. We can get this done by Thanksgiving or earlier if we work together.

Madam President, I want to talk about CHIP first.

CHIP provides comprehensive health insurance for kids whose families do not quite qualify for Medicaid but who cannot afford private insurance. CHIP covers basic medical care, like immunizations, prescriptions, routine checkups and dental visits. Thanks to CHIP, the rate of uninsured kids in America has dropped from 14 percent to 4.5 percent.

CHIP has been a lifesaver for some families. This is Colton. He is from the small town of Anthony, NM. Colton was 8 years old when he was diagnosed with cancer. Fortunately, the cancer was treatable, and he was insured by CHIP. So the cost of his treatment and medications were covered. Without CHIP, Colton's family would have had to have paid hundreds of dollars a month for his treatment, which is the cost of a month's rent.

Families should not have to choose between lifesaving care for their children and a roof over their heads.

Colton's father wrote to the Santa Fe New Mexican, and it read:

Watching my son battle for his life was almost more than I could bear. I couldn't imagine dealing with the stress of scraping together everything we had to cover the medical bills if we didn't have coverage. Having [CHIP] allowed us to focus on what was truly important—Colton's future and being there for my family as we went through this life-changing experience.

But, now, States are looking at contingency plans. New Mexico has reserves but only until next spring. Some States will be forced to cover all of the cost in just a few months, and others are preparing to send notices to families that their coverage will end. No parent who is already in crisis because of a sick child should have to go through that. CHIP was a bipartisan success story. I hope that we can get back to working together on this.

The 50-year-old Community Health Centers Program delivers comprehensive healthcare services to some of our Nation's most vulnerable individuals—schoolchildren, people experiencing homelessness, agricultural workers, and our veterans. In New Mexico, 17 of these clinics serve 333,000 patients in 90 underserved and rural communities.

The Community Health Centers are also important to the economy in rural communities. In New Mexico, they employ almost 3,000 people across the State. These clinics cannot sustain a 70-percent funding cut if Federal support is canceled. Many would be forced to shut their doors.

I recently visited one of these clinics—the De Baca Family Practice Clinic in Fort Sumner, NM. It provides high-quality medical services to over 3,000 patients. Over one-fifth of its patients are children, and another one-fifth are seniors, but if funding runs out, the De Baca Family Practice Clinic will be forced to start laying off essential medical staff and to reduce its hours.

Clinic director Lisa Walraven told me: "You simply cannot reduce funding by 70 percent from a small frontier healthcare facility and expect anything other than a significant loss of access to care."

Both CHIP and community health centers provide preventive care to underserved communities throughout New Mexico. They are supporting our healthcare system to ensure that we don't let any families fall through the cracks.

Indian Country also depends on these programs and others like them to provide vital care to their communities. The Federal Government has a trust and treaty obligation to provide healthcare to Native Americans. Yet the Indian Health Service is severely underfunded. CHIP and similar programs help to supplement care that the Indian Health Service cannot provide. CHIP currently covers more than 1,400 Native American children in New Mexico. Allowing these programs to expire would betray our treaty obligations.

Another program cited that is critical to Indian Country is the Special Diabetes Program for Indians. It provides grants to Native communities for diabetes treatment and prevention. Without proper treatment, diabetes can lead to limb amputation and kidney failure. The disproportionate impact on Native Americans is a public health problem that we cannot ignore.

This program is making real progress. It helps to fund over 300 Native health programs in 35 States, including 29 programs in New Mexico. They help educate communities about how to prevent diabetes and provide care so that Native patients can manage their diabetes more effectively.

It is one of the most effective public health initiatives ever undertaken by the Federal Government. Diabetes-related kidney failure has dropped 54 percent among Native Americans. In some States, like Alaska, leg amputations among Native people with diabetes have decreased more than 68 percent. This program literally saves life and limb.

Program directors across Indian Country tell me that without this funding they will have to start laying off staff and limiting their diabetes programming. We need to provide funding to Tribal communities so that they can invest in projects that will be more effective in preventing diabetes over time.

Congress must act to allow this successful program to reach its full potential. We cannot allow diabetes to become a death sentence in Indian Country once again.

The failure to fund CHIP, the failure to fund the community health centers, home visiting health services, and the Special Diabetes Program will force families into another health crisis. Every day that we neglect these programs, more people will suffer. These programs have years—sometimes decades—of proven success.

The American people want Congress to work together to come up with bipartisan solutions. Most of these programs were created through bipartisan cooperation. Let's get back to that spirit and work together for the American people again.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. TILLIS). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

Mr. BARRASSO. Mr. President, President Trump has been in office now for more than 9 months. For this entire time, Senate Democrats have been trying to obstruct him from doing the very job that he was elected by the American people to do. The President has laid out his agenda to create jobs, to grow the economy, and to help hard-working American taxpayers. Yet Democrats will do everything they can to stop the President from putting his team in place to accomplish these goals.

They have tried to stop the President's legislative agenda because they know that his policies will actually work. When Republican policies become law, Democrats know that the people will see how successful these Republican policies are. I think Democrats are worried that they may never win another election again once we get these policies into place. That is why we have seen a record number of delays and obstructions by the Democrats in the Senate. They have done it on legislation, and they have even blocked the President from filling some of the most basic jobs within his administration.

It started on day one. Normally, on Inauguration Day, the President gets a substantial number of people confirmed to his Cabinet. The idea is to let the President get his team in place so that it can hit the ground running. President Obama had six of his Cabinet Secretaries confirmed on Inauguration Day, and President Bush had seven Secretaries confirmed on Inauguration Day. These confirmations were by voice vote, but that was not the case with President Trump—just two with rollcall votes on Inauguration Day.

Republicans in the Senate did not do anything to try to block the Cabinet Secretaries for President Obama, for we understood that it was best to give a new President a chance and for all of us to work together when we could. With George W. Bush, it was seven. That is how it usually works, but not anymore—no, not with this group of Democrats in the Senate. They really were never interested in giving President Trump a chance. They really do not seem to be working together. Last January, President Trump had two people confirmed to the Cabinet on Inauguration Day—the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security. They were the only two jobs that the Democrats allowed the President to fill.

In President Trump's first 9 months in office, Democrats have continued to block the way. They have allowed just 185 of his nominees to take their jobs. That is how ridiculous the Democrats have been in trying to keep President Trump from putting his team in place. By this far into the administration at the same time, President Obama had

364 nominees in place. The Democrats have blocked judges, Cabinet Secretaries, and other high-ranking officials.

Now, it is interesting because you have seen this. Many of these nominees even have Democrat support, and they are not controversial at all, but Democrats are doing everything they can to slow down the process. During President Obama's first 9 months, he had 364 confirmed. So President Obama had gotten 2 for every 1 that President Trump has gotten confirmed.

There are 81 of President Trump's nominees who have gone through the committees and another some number today. They are 81 people who have been nominated by the President for positions in the government who are just waiting right now for a vote on the Senate floor. Many of these people got through the nomination process in June but are still waiting and being blocked by Democrats in the Senate. It is outrageous.

Do Democrats really think that these are not important jobs—that they do not need people in those jobs to do the important work that they have been assigned to do?

I believe that we should confirm as many of them as possible today. There are 13 judges waiting for confirmation. There are 8 U.S. attorneys waiting, including the U.S. attorney from my home State of Wyoming. These are important jobs.

We all understand that there is a process that we need to go through to fill these positions—to make sure the people are vetted and to make sure they are the right people for the jobs. All of these people have followed the process. They have been doing everything they have been asked to do in that they have filled out the paperwork, filled out the disclosures, and have gone through the committees. Now it is time for the Senate to get its work done. I would say let's do it today.

Interestingly enough, in August, the Democrats finally allowed a significant number of people to be confirmed. More than 60 people were confirmed by voice vote on one day. That is the kind of thing that used to be very routine in the Senate—letting a large number of noncontroversial nominees be approved all at once. It is now time to do it again. There is a significant backlog. So I want to get these folks confirmed now. It is time to clear the deck and let these people get to work who have been nominated and vetted, who have gone through the committees and been approved.

We need to move these nominations because we have more nominations on the way. We are going to have to deal with the nominations of two Cabinet Secretaries for positions that are currently vacant. President Trump has nominated Kirstjen Nielsen to be Secretary of Homeland Security. It is an important job, and she is very qualified for it.

Do the Democrats plan to block her confirmation to be Secretary of Homeland Security? Do the Democrats plan to obstruct this qualified woman from doing the important job she has been nominated by President Trump to do?

The President deserves to have his team in place. The Senate has an obligation to get that work done. The Department of Homeland Security deserves to have a Secretary in place to keep us safe. That is how it has worked in the past and how it should be working now.

These people manage major Departments of the government. They manage many career workers. We know that the Washington bureaucracy has grown tremendously over the years and that it is very difficult to eliminate people who aren't doing their jobs properly. We have seen it in the scandals over the years. Remember the Gold King Mine disaster? President Obama's EPA—the group who is supposed to protect the environment—actually dumped 3 million gallons of toxic wastewater in a river in Colorado. Remember the scandals involving bureaucrats in the Department of Veterans Affairs, the IRS, and the General Services Administration during the Obama administration? We need Presidential appointees in place overseeing these Federal workers to make sure that the government of the people is accountable to the American people.

The Senate needs to be involved in providing oversight through our power of advice and consent. Democrats don't want that to happen. They have been keeping the Senate from providing that oversight, dragging out the process, making sure that the bureaucrats whom they seem to have more faith in are accountable to the American people rather than those whom the American people voted for on election day.

These are important jobs, and we have qualified people ready to do the work. Democrats have delayed for 9 months. It is time to break that logjam today.

I thank the Presiding Officer.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

WESTERN WILDFIRES

Mr. MERKLEY. Mr. President, I am coming to the floor to talk about the challenge we have with forest fires that have been raging in the West, in Montana and Idaho and Washington and Oregon and California, and periodically we have devastating fires in Colorado, New Mexico, and Nevada.

We have to figure out how we do a better job in a multitude of ways. First, it is very important that we quit treating terrible fire years, enormous

fires, as if they are some ordinary event because there is currently no FEMA-style reaction to terrible forest fires.

We respond with FEMA for tornadoes and for floods and for tidal waves and for hurricanes and for earthquakes but not forest fires. Well, the result is, the Forest Service runs out of funds to fight the fires in a bad year, and then they have to drain all the other programs they are working on, including the programs to prepare for future timber cuts, the programs to thin the forests, the programs to repair the infrastructure in the Federal forests, all these other efforts, and then they can't resume those efforts until we have restored their funding, which can come often far later.

This fire borrowing has to end. That is why we absolutely need to support the bill Senator WYDEN, Senator CRAPO, and others have been working on to say: Let's create a FEMA-like structure for these worst fires so we end this fire-borrowing devastation of the fire accounts. That absolutely needs to happen.

Right now, there are three funding issues we need to address. First, we need to help out the communities that have been impacted economically by these devastating fires. Some have been scorched directly, others have been profoundly affected by the smoke in the community, others have been affected by highways being shut down, and others have been impacted by tourism dropping dramatically. So it is very important that we send a message to the Department of Agriculture, the Small Business Administration, and the Department of Housing and Urban Development to say: Use your emergency programs to assist these communities. We really should make sure they are at the front of the line, along with those who have suffered the disasters in Texas, Florida, and Puerto Rico, for emergency loans and assistance from the Small Business Administration and for an augmented share of community development block grants to assist them in a very flexible fashion.

I had the chance to meet this weekend with leaders in the Rogue Valley to talk about how smoke had affected them, and company after company after company had been dramatically impacted. Some you would say was obvious. If you have a zip line company and tourists aren't coming because the smoke is very thick, you are going to be impacted, but others are a little less obvious; for example, the production of wine and the potential impact of the smoke and the fires directly on the harvest but then also on perhaps tainting the flavor of the wine, which will have an impact down the road.

So we need to make sure we do all we can to assist these communities just as we are assisting the communities that have been devastated by Hurricanes Harvey, Maria, and Irma.

The second thing we need to do is, we need to include \$200 million in the next

package, the third tranche of assistance for the disasters this year. We need \$200 million to fund the repair and replacement of infrastructure and trail infrastructure damaged—the buildings and the trails that were damaged by these forest fires. Now, that \$200 million, that goes half to trails and infrastructure that were damaged by the hurricanes and half to those impacted by the fires. Essentially, the damage was roughly equally split. Without this type of funding, the Forest Service will be forced to postpone or cancel projects in fiscal year 2018 to accommodate the recovery. It will compromise the work to remove hazardous trees for public safety, road and trail maintenance, restoring vegetation in watersheds, and rehabilitating wildlife and fish habitat.

The third thing we have to do is seize the moment and invest in fire resilience. Every single time we have a fire season like this—and this season we spent almost twice as much, on average, to fight the fires—people ask: Why don't we do more on the front end to reduce the risk of these fires?

Well, that is such logical thinking to do more on the front end. What do they mean by that? We have millions of acres of second-growth forests. We clearcut them. Some of them regrew naturally. Others were replanted. We replant virtually everything now. After 10 or 20 years, the trees are very close together. The branches are very close to the ground. This is prime territory for fires. Fires love this. Disease loves this. So it becomes a real problem unless you go in and thin the trees enormously—take out a lot of those trees—and proceed to get rid of the hazardous fuels of branches that accumulate on the ground and so forth. But if you do those two things, those forests become much more resistant to fire.

When you are doing this on a stand that is a bit older—20 or 30 years older—you also get a significant supply of sawlogs for the mills. So this is a real win-win situation. You get a forest that is better in resisting fire, you get a forest that is better in resisting disease, you get a forest that is better for timber stands, and you get a forest that is better in terms of being an ecosystem. With all that winning, we need to do more to make it actually happen.

In my State of Oregon, there are 1.6 million acres that have already gone through the environmental process. They are ready to be thinned and have the hazardous fuels removed. In Washington State, it is at least 400,000 acres. There are probably hundreds of thousands of acres in every State from Montana and Idaho to California, Nevada, and New Mexico.

This picture shows the difference. This road right here had a stand on the left that had not been thinned. If you can make out the colors, these trees are dead. They are all brown—dead trees because of the heat of the fire when it swept through. This side of the road had been treated. The trees had been thinned. The brush had been