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House of Representatives

The House met at 12:30 p.m.

MORNING HOUR DEBATES

The SPEAKER. Pursuant to the order of the House of January 19, 1999, the Chair will now recognize Members from lists submitted by the majority and minority leaders for morning hour debates. The Chair will alternate recognition between the parties, with each party limited to 30 minutes, and each Member, except the majority leader, the minority leader, or the minority whip, limited to 5 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) for 5 minutes.

MTBE USAGE

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, this week in the Committee on Commerce we are going to have a hearing Thursday, May 6, at 9:30, concerning amendment to the Clean Air Act. I am going to paint a little bit what the problem is, and it is centered at the EPA. In their efforts to really clean up the air what has happened is they have polluted the water, and it is a very interesting, but sad, commentary, and the Governor of California is coming here to testify, and almost all the Members of Congress from California are on the bill of the gentleman from California (Mr. BILBRAY), which is H.R. 11, and we are going to be holding a hearing on this bill. And let me just give my colleagues, Mr. Speaker, a little bit of background on this because this shows the unintended consequences sometimes of what we do here in Washington and what the EPA extends further to do.

So, if my colleagues will bear with me, imagine a city suddenly faced with contaminated drinking water. The elected officials desperately search for the responsible parties, they want retribution and justice, they want their tainted water supply cleaned up, the guilty must be found, and they must be punished.

Now this perhaps sounds like a Hollywood plot, a Hollywood movie, but it is not, and for many communities across this Nation, they are facing this situation. The guilty party is none other than the supposed protector, the Environmental Protection Agency.

Tom Randall, a managing editor of the Environmental News, recently brought some articles to my attention. They detail a pollutant being forced upon the American public by the EPA. The pollutant is methyl tertiary-butyl ether, MTBE. Now this may not be a common household word to many, but the EPA, oil companies which were mandated to produce it and many communities across this country are all too familiar with this water polluting gasoline additive.

The problem began in 1990 with a misguided amendment to the Clean Air Act which led the EPA to mandate the use of oxygenates in gasoline sold in areas which are out of compliance with clean air standards. Many in this body assumed the EPA had done their homework. In California, they trusted the EPA enough to become the first to use MTBE statewide even in areas not mandated by the EPA. In doing so, they also became the first State to face a water pollution problem we may all face in this country all because the EPA did not do its homework and still has not to this day.

These are the facts: There are basically two types of oxygenates: alcohol-based and ether-based. Alcohols are generally used in the Midwest where they are produced, but since they cannot be shipped through pipelines because they pick up water ethers, primarily MTBE, are the only economically feasible choices for the rest of the country.

What the EPA apparently did not know back when their mandate went into effect, and they still will not admit, is that MTBE is a powerful and persistent water pollutant and, from leaks and spills, has made its way into groundwater of nearly every State in this Nation; the problem, of course, being worse in California, the harbinger of what will surely come to pass in much of the rest of this country. It takes only a small amount of MTBE to make water undrinkable. It spreads rapidly in both groundwater and reservoirs, and so far attempts to remove MTBE from water have proven difficult and costly.

Has the EPA done anything to advance independent peer review research into this? Not at this point, Mr. Speaker. They have appointed a, quote, blue ribbon panel to study it, a panel composed in most parts in part of representatives of MTBE producers and environmental lobbyists which in my opinion have vested interest in protecting the use of this fuel additive.

In the meantime, States, universities and the courts are scrambling to clean up the EPA's mess. It is time, Mr. Speaker, we move to help them with meaningful legislation to end the mandates for oxygenates which, by the way, many scientists contend do nothing to reduce air pollution from the majority of cars on the road today.

Fortunately, Mr. Speaker, my friends and colleagues, the gentleman from California (Mr. BILBRAY) and the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. FRANKS) have introduced corrective legislation. Mr. BILBRAY has introduced H.R. 11 which the Committee on Commerce will be holding a hearing on this Thursday. H.R. 11 allows for California to use alternative methods other than only using the oxygenates in gasoline. I applaud their efforts and encourage State engagement rather than federal mandates. The bill of the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. FRANKS), H.R. 1367, would effectively end the use of MTBE.

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Mr. Speaker, I strongly support both of these bills, and I urge my colleagues to support them also.

TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNITY SYSTEMS PRESERVATION ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. RADANOVICH). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. BLUMENAUER) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. BLUMENAUER. Mr. Speaker, as someone who came to Congress because I believe that Federal Government should do more to be a constructive partner with our communities to help promote livability, I could not be more excited about developments that are taking place this week in Detroit. I just left the conference, the town meeting, on sustainable development where there were over 3100 people from around the country and more still registering. It was not so much a wrap-up of the President's Council of Sustainable Development, but rather a handoff to citizen activists, students, business, government, nongovernmental agencies to deal with specific activities that they could do to help promote livable communities. There were a variety of workshops with people learning from one another, and the administration has announced 70 specific commitments to help promote that more sustainable future.

One of the programs that I am most pleased with was the Transportation and Community Systems Preservation Act. This was a provision in our TEA–21 legislation, the Surface Transportation Act last year, that was born in the Oregon experience where a group of private citizens pushed the State and Federal transportation agencies to consider an alternative to simply constructing a traditional bypass to look at what would happen if we were more thoughtful about the ways that we put pieces together.

The results of their research was stunning. It proved conclusively that by dealing with the integration of land use, transportation being more connected and giving people more choices that we could, in fact, reduce congestion more than simply having a pavement-only solution.

That found its way into TEA–21. I was happy to have supported it in our House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. The driving force in the Senate was my Senator, RON WYDEN, a former colleague here in the House, and it has opened the floodgates; over 500 applications from around the country totaling over $400 million from people who understand the power of being able to plan their community. Sadly we are only able to award a small portion of those programs, approximately 39, although there are opportunities in the horizon to increase those in future years.

There may be some federal programs that obviously spend more money, but I think there will be fewer that will have more of an impact than helping citizens sort out the right investments and allowing them to be part of framing those solutions.

The entire town meeting effort is an illustration of what livable communities are all about. It is not about Federal interference, but partnership. It is about giving people more choices rather than fewer and that will end up costing people less money rather than more.

It is not the solutions for livable communities that are pushing people to the edge financially. It is the consequences of throwing money at problems in an unplanned way, problems that were first created by not carefully planning and thinking about what we are doing.

A country that can put a man on the moon and bring him back safely over 20 years ago does not have to build a generation of failed infrastructure projects. It should not be illegal in most of America for a clerk working in a drug store to live in an apartment above that drug store rather than having to have to commute every day. The Federal Government should not pay people more to pave a creek than restore a wetland, especially if that wetland restoration will actually solve the problem as well or even better, and we should guarantee that people in communities, large and small, across America have a place at the table to discuss the impacts of infrastructure investments rather than being shut out by State bureaucracies.

Finally, the Federal Government itself should do more to lead by example, whether it is finally requiring the Post Office to obey the same laws and codes that the private sector or that local government itself needs to follow or, for that matter, having the House of Representatives do as good a job in our recycling efforts as a couple of ambitious Boy Scout troops do back home.

The bottom line is that the American public wants our families to be safe, economically secure and healthy. What is going on with the town meeting this week in Detroit is an example of how to do that. I hope that my colleagues will look at ways that each of us in Congress can do our best to help make our communities more livable.

THE CONTINUING STEEL IMPORT CRISIS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Ohio (Mr. REGULA) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. REGULA. Mr. Speaker, the steel import crisis, which began in 1997, is still continuing today. The numbers tell the story. Total steel imports in 1998 were at the highest level ever, 41.5 million net tons of steel mill products. This was a 33 percent increase over imports in 1997, which also was a record year.

While the pressure was on as the House debated the steel issue earlier this year and overwhelmingly passed H.R. 975, we saw steel imports begin to come down in December 1998 and in January and February of this year. But as soon as the pressure let up with uncertainty over the fate of this legislation in the other body, steel imports shot up again in March. We saw a 25 percent increase in steel imports in March over the levels in February.

The U.S. market continues to be the market of last resort for many exporters. As markets overseas continue to face economic turmoil, exporters continue to ship unprecedented levels of steel into the United States, the world's most open market. In order to obtain hard currency, exporters have sent the world's oversupply of steel to the U.S., often at prices that bear no relation to the actual production costs.

In March we also saw some imports source and product switching, which all of us had feared. We saw an increase in imports of blooms, billets and slabs and in hot rolled sheet from countries not subject to the current trade cases.

The impacts of this steel import crisis cannot be overstated. Every single ton of dumped steel displaces a ton of domestic production. The United States industry is losing competitiveness because of these unfairly traded imports. Companies are finding that as prices drop and imports continue to increase, they cannot commit to future capital investments, they cannot commit to needed modernizations, and they cannot commit to additional research and development. These effects, if not reversed soon, could have a lasting implication on an important industry well into the 21st century.

Company by company the impact is also being felt in the short term. Four companies have filed for bankruptcy protection. Mills are dramatically cutting production in capacity utilization. Foreign producers that dump their products are now realizing the benefits of American companies' successful efforts to rebuild the market for steel products here in the United States, and most disturbing is the damage that is being done to many American families as steelworkers lose their jobs. As stated in the President's steel report in January, 10,000 Americans have lost their jobs because of this crisis. Many will never return to jobs that can provide the level of pay and benefits that were provided by the steelworker jobs that have been lost, and that does not take into account the impact on local community services where jobs are lost, the impact of suppliers. So the job number could be much larger.

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Some workers may not lose their jobs, but short work weeks, reduced shifts and lost hours can also have a devastating impact on their families. Those laid off and those with reduced hours are struggling to pay rent and mortgages, to put food on the table and