that are old and obsolete. They spend it to operate and maintain these major delivery locations, but these locations have very low occupancy and a lot of unused space. So as I mentioned earlier, there is $20 billion that could be saved over the next 5 years.

I think many of my colleagues know that the Veterans Health Administration hospital utilization plan has been dropping because the number of patients has gone down. That is right, it has gone from 49,000 patients a day in 1989 to 21,000 in 1998. Almost half of this decline has occurred over the past 3 years. Not only has the hospital utilization dropped but the number of hospital admissions has decreased from over 1 million in 1989 to about 400,000 in 1998. So that is about a 40 percent drop, Mr. Speaker.

By the VA's own estimates, the veteran population is now 25 million and will drop to about 16 million in the year 2020. So I am concerned, I think all of us should be concerned, about those facilities that cost so much to operate. More than 40 percent of the VA health care facilities are over 50 years old and we are just not getting a good bang for the buck for the taxpayers. It cost as much as $1 million a day to run these underutilized and unused facilities, according to the GAO; and I do not think we should continue to do that. That is why myself and my colleague, the gentleman from Alabama (Mr. EVERETT), who is chairman of the Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations, have held hearings to discuss this and try to correct this egregious use of taxpayers' money.

Let us not forget, of course, that veterans pay taxes themselves, so we want to make sure that the taxes they pay are effectively used also.

The GAO found that the Veterans Health Administration has made limited progress over the past 4 months in implementing a realignment process. They also found that the VA contains a diverse group of competing stakeholders who oppose plan changes in the areas I have just talked about. The GAO has made suggestions. They suggested more independent planning by those with no vested interest in geographic locations. They also recommend that the VA consider consolidating services, developing partnerships with other health care providers, and replacing obsolete assets with modern ones that address the health needs of today's and future veterans.

I have a bill, Mr. Speaker, that addresses part of these concerns. It is H.R. 2116. I am hoping that this bill will come to the floor. One of the major components of my bill, called the Veterans Millennium Health Care Act, contains elements targeted at capital asset management issues, in fact, what I like to call enhanced stakeholder involvement for all of the veterans.

My bill offers a blueprint to help position the VA for the future. The point is that VA has the closure authority. The administration can take those facilities that are obsolete and not being used and close them, but it does not seem to want to. I think what we need to do is allow a new process to get this started. So my bill calls for a process to be sure that decisions on closing hospitals can only be made based upon comprehensive planning with veterans' participation, and that is very important and very appropriate.

The bill sets numerous safeguards in place and would specifically provide that VA cannot simply stop operating a hospital and walk away from its responsibilities to veterans. It must, quote, reinvest savings in a new, improved treatment facility or improve services in the area.

I think the bill responds to the pressing veterans' needs. It opens the door to an expansion of long-term care, to greater access to outpatient care and to improved benefits, including emergency care coverage.

So in turn, Mr. Speaker, I think it provides the reforms we need for the next millennium that could advance the goals of the GAO, and I think it is another important feature towards getting better efficient use of the money.

OMNIBUS MERCURY EMISSIONS REDUCTION ACT OF 1999

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

Mr. ALLEN. Mr. Speaker, yesterday I introduced the Omnibus Mercury Emissions Reduction Act of 1999, a bill to reduce mercury emissions by 95 percent nationwide. I am pleased to be joined by 27 of my colleagues who have agreed to be original cosponsors of this important bipartisan legislation.

Although mercury is a naturally occurring element, it has built up to dangerous levels in the environment. Mercury pollution impairs the reproductive and nervous systems of freshwater fish and wildlife, especially loons. It can be extremely harmful when ingested by humans. It is especially dangerous to pregnant women, children, and developing fetuses. Ingesting mercury can severely damage the central nervous system, causing numbness in extremities, impaired vision, kidney disease, and in some cases even death.

According to EPA's mercury study report to Congress, exposure to mercury poses a significant threat to human health, and concentrations of mercury in the environment are increasing.

The report concludes that mercury pollution in the U.S. comes primarily from a few categories of combustion units and incinerators. Together, these sources emit more than 155 tons of mercury into our environment each year. These emissions can be suspended in the air for up to a year and travel hundreds of miles before settling in bodies of water and soil.

Nearly every State confronts the health risks posed by mercury pollution and the problem is growing. Just 6 years ago, 27 States had issued mercury advisories warning the public about consuming freshwater fish contaminated with mercury. Today, the number of States issuing advisories has risen to 40, and the number of water bodies covered by the warnings has nearly doubled.

In some States, including my home State of Maine, every single river, lake, and stream is under a mercury advisory, and that applies to the States shown in black on this chart.

The growing problem has already prompted action at the State and regional level. Last year, the New England governors and Eastern Canadians premiers enacted a plan to reduce emissions, educate the public, and label products that contain mercury. Maine and Vermont have passed legislation to cut mercury pollution, and Massachusetts and New Jersey have enacted strict mercury emission standards on waste incinerators.

Although there is a clear consensus that mercury pollution poses a significant threat, State and regional initiatives alone are not sufficient to deal with this problem. As Congress recognized when it passed the Clean Air Act nearly 30 years ago, Federal legislation is the only effective way to deal with airborne pollutants that know no State boundaries. That is why I am introducing legislation to reduce the amount of mercury emitted from the largest polluters. This bill sets mercury emission standards for coal-fired utilities, waste combustors, commercial and industrial boilers, chlor-alkali plants, and Portland cement plants. According to the EPA's report to Congress, these sources are responsible for more than 87 percent of all mercury emissions in the U.S.

My bill also phases out the use of mercury in products and ensures that municipalities work with waste incinerators that keep products that contain mercury out of the waste stream. It would also require a recycling program for products that contain mercury as an essential component and increases research into the effects of mercury pollution.

With mercury levels in the environment growing every year, it is long past time to enact a comprehensive strategy for controlling mercury pollution. We have the technology for companies to meet these standards, and this bill will allow them to choose the best approach for their facility.

We have reduced or eliminated other toxins without the catastrophic effects that some industries predicted. Now we should eliminate dangerous levels of mercury. I urge my colleagues to support this legislation and stop mercury from polluting our waters, infecting our fish and wildlife, and threatening the health of our children.

A SOURING DEBATE OVER MILK PRICES

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

Mr. GUTKNECHT. Mr. Speaker, very soon the Congress will be engaged in a very vicious debate about milk. And that may surprise some people; but when we start talking about milk marketing order reforms, it is amazing how aggressive some Members can become.

Mr. Speaker, in the last couple of days our colleague, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GREEN) and myself have sent to all of our other colleagues a copy of an editorial which appeared recently in the Kansas City Star.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to read some excerpts of that editorial because as far as I am concerned they got the debate exactly right. I read and I quote, in 1996, Congress ordered the administration to simplify the pricing of milk. That is easy enough. Stop regulating it. But this is the farm sector and a free market in milk is somehow inconceivable. Instead, milk prices are calculated from rules and equations filling several volumes of the Code of Federal Regulations.

The administration's proposed reform would reduce the number of regions for which the price of wholesale milk is regulated from 33 to 11. Fine, but it would also perpetuate the loopy Depression-era notion that the price of milk should in some respects be based in part on its distance from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. Under current policy, producers farther away from this supposed heart of the dairy region generally receive higher premiums or differentials.

The administration called for slightly lower differentials for beverage milk in many regions, but in Congress even this minuscule step towards rationality is being swept aside. The Committee on Agriculture has substituted a measure that essentially maintains a status quo. Similar moves are afoot in the Senate. Worse, some dairy supporters are working to reauthorize and expand the Northeast Interstate Dairy Compact, a regional milk cartel, and allow similar grouping for southern States. Missouri's legislature, by the way, has already voted to join the Southern Compact, even though it would result in higher prices for consumers. The Consumer Federation of America reports that the Northeast Dairy Compact raised retail milk prices by an average of 15 cents a gallon over 2 years.

Dairy producers concerned about the long view should be worried. Critics point out that the higher milk differentials endorsed by the House Committee on Agriculture may well lead to lower revenue for many producers. This is because the higher prices will encourage more production, driving down the base milk price and negating the higher differential.

The worst idea in this developing stew is the prospect for dairy-compact proliferation. A compact works like an internal tariff, because the cartel prohibits sales above an agreed-upon floor price. Producers within the region are protected from would-be outside competitors.

Opponents point out that more regional compacts, and the higher prices they support, will breed excessive production, creating dairy surpluses that will be dumped into markets of other regions. This will prompt other States to demand similar protection, promoting the spread of dairy compacts.

Ultimately, as in the 1980s, political pressure will build to liquidate the dairy surplus in a huge multibillion dollar buyout of cheese, milk powder, and even entire herds.

Congress should permit the Northeast Compact to sunset or expire, which will occur if the lawmakers simply do nothing. In fact, doing nothing to the administration's proposal seems to be the best choice in this case, or more properly the least bad. Perhaps some day Washington will debate real price simplification as in ditching dairy socialism and letting prices fluctuate according to the law of supply and demand, closed quote.

Mr. Speaker, the Kansas City Star is right. We should allow Secretary Glickman's modest reforms to go forward. We should sunset the Dairy Compact. Mr. Speaker, markets are more powerful than armies. They allow the market to set the price of milk in Moscow. Maybe we should try it right here in Washington, D.C.

TWO OF THE MANY PROBLEMS WITH THE PROPOSED TAX CUT

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

Mr. OLVER. Mr. Speaker, for this week the high profile, main business of the Republican leadership in Congress is to reach a final version of the $800 billion tax cut that has been proposed.

Now, the Republican leadership says that their tax cut is for the middle class, but that is clearly not true.

The House-passed version of the bill passed here, passed this branch 2 weeks ago, and in that version the 6 million highest income taxpayers, which represent about 5 percent of all taxpayers in this country, with incomes of over $125,000 a year, would get 61 percent, more than three-fifths of the total tax reduction, while the other 120 million taxpayers in this country, 95 percent of all the taxpayers, they would get only 39 percent of the total tax reduction that is involved.

Now, I do not think that many people would consider that a middle class tax cut. In fact, it is designed to make the already rich a very great deal richer, while the broad middle class of people in this country, the families that are living on an income of between $20,000 to, say, $80,000 a year, are only going to see a tax cut that is worth one or two cups of coffee a day for those families.

But that is only a small part of the story. The rest of the story is what cannot be done if the Republican leadership's tax cut bill were to become law. For that, I would like to just indicate a couple of areas of what cannot be done. Look at and consider the question of the national debt. On this chart, this chart shows what the publicly-held national debt of $3.7 trillion is made up of.

These pie chart sections, 38 presidents from 1789 until 1977 produced this blue piece. This is President Carter's portion of the debt. This is President Reagan's. This is President Bush's. This is President Clinton's. The interest on that $3.7 trillion of debt now is about as large, it is about $230 billion a year, is about as large as the whole debt that was created during the Carter administration, that was built up during the Carter administration.

What happens? The tax cut makes certain that we will not be able to pay off that debt, and we will have to continue paying $200 billion or more per year for years into the future. That means higher interest rates for every American family that wants to buy a home, higher interest rates for every business person who wants to create a business that is going to provide more jobs.

So, the debt problem.

Let me take a different issue. If you take a look at the Social Security situation, the tax cut, if it were to become law in its present form, would make it very much more difficult to extend the Social Security system beyond the year 2030. We know the demographics. We know how many people are going to be retiring between now and then. We know how many are going to enter the workforce between now and then, and we know that the reserve funds in the Social Security system will run out in 2030. And we will only be able to operate on the basis of whatever is paid into the Social Security trust fund year by year, which means the benefits for the ever-growing number of senior citizens will have to be reduced or the retirement age for people will have to go up.

At the same time, at the same time, we know that for those people who are businesspeople who are wealthy Americans, the retirement age is going down. People are retiring, if they are wealthy enough, at 50, 55, some even younger than that. Some of them never have worked so they never have to retire.

So the Social Security system is in serious jeopardy of not having any additional revenue to put into the protection and preservation of the Social Security system.

Now, my mother, who is 92 years old, is living now on Social Security that is under $500 per month. She also has a couple hundred dollars of income from