

Climate Assessment. Through his blog, "Weather and Climate Matter," and his broadcasts, Jim makes weather and climate understandable for his viewers. I spoke with him while I was in South Carolina, and I learned that his TV station thought it may actually take some heat for Jim's discussing climate change on the air, and they were braced for the flow back. It never came. South Carolinians have their eyes open. It is only taboo here in Washington.

I continued down into Georgia, to the heart of the Savannah Historic District. Audrey Platt, the former vice-chair of the Garden Club of America's Conservation Committee, invited me to her historic home in Savannah for a local meeting of the Garden Club joined by Savannah Mayor Edna Jackson. Also there was Reverend Mary Beene from the Faith Presbyterian Church who talked about the M.K. Pentecost Ecology Fund they run for ecological stewardship of natural resources.

We headed out to Fort Pulaski and Tybee Island. There is a tide gauge at Fort Pulaski. It takes measurements. It is not complicated. It produces clear, irrefutable facts, not theories. At Fort Pulaski, NOAA measures that sea level has risen over eight inches. Projections for 2100 put most of this region under water. This chart shows that sea level rise of 3 feet will devastate the area.

Here is Fort Pulaski, GA, and the coast around it. That is what is left with 3 feet of sea level rise.

On Tybee Island I had lunch with city officials and council members, representatives of the Georgia conservancy, NOAA scientists, Georgia Garden Club members, and local sustainability directors. The message was clear: Sea level is rising. Oceans are warming. Infrastructure and ecosystems that Georgians depend on are being threatened. One example: According to a University of Georgia biologist, sea level rise will affect the State's oyster crop. The oysters in Georgia thrive at the tidal edge, sometimes above water, sometimes below water, as the tide goes up and down. As rising sea levels come up, it will cause the oyster habitat to shift or leave them vulnerable to predation as they spend more time under water. Being out of the water actually protects them from underwater predators.

The people of Tybee Island are preparing. Councilman Paul Wolff showed me the storm-water tide gate, which the City of Tybee put in place to accommodate higher tides and rising seas. He explained to me that the road out to Tybee Island—Tybee Road—which is, by the way, the island's only access road, will be flooded as much as 45 times per year with just one foot of sea level rise, and the city has already put in place a short-term plan for 14 to 20 inches of sea level rise by 2060. What does that do to an island's economy if, 45 days of the year, people can't get there?

Down the coast, I visited the University of Georgia's Marine Institute at Sapelo Island and its director Dr. Merryl Alber. Sapelo is a barrier island off the coast of Georgia managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. The Marine Institute is a world renowned field station for research into coastal ecosystems. Here I learned how they measure what they call blue carbon, the amount of carbon stored in the salt marsh. They are doing that as part of the National Science Foundation's long-term ecological research program.

Salt marsh, as it turns out, are huge carbon sinks. They absorb massive amounts of carbon. But the carbon that is stored there may be returned to the atmosphere and add to the climate problem if salt marshes succumb to sea level rise and have nowhere to migrate. We also heard how the intruding salt water is changing local marsh ecosystems and jeopardizing fresh water supply.

Georgia actually runs a Coastal Management Program Coastal Incentive Grant Program to increase knowledge about sea level rise. If Georgia runs a Coastal Management Program Coastal Incentive Grant Program on sea level rise, how can people who represent Georgia in Washington pretend this isn't occurring?

I ended the day in Georgia out on the water with Charlie Phillips, who is a terrific character, a great guy to be with—a local, very successful clammer. We went out on his air boat over the marshes that he built himself. He is also very knowledgeable. He is a member of the South Atlantic Fishery Management Council that runs the regional fishery. He has been an outdoorsman his whole life, and he needs fresh, clean water for his Georgia clams. Unfortunately, Charlie says that changes in climate are hurting the ecosystem that supports his livelihood—his and his employees. He worries about the future of his business.

This is South Carolina and Georgia. When you actually go there, what do you find? Business owners, researchers, faith leaders, and elected officials, all responding to changes that they are witnessing. They understand. They see the risks that climate change poses, and they hope their representatives in Congress will wake up to the danger of climate change, the home-State danger that their constituents are already seeing happening right around them.

After seeing the beauty of both South Carolina and Georgia along those lovely coasts, it is painful to see there the early warning symptoms of climate change. It called to mind President Theodore Roosevelt's message from more than 100 years ago to America's schoolchildren. It is sort of old fashioned language, but that was 1907. He said this:

[I]n your full manhood and womanhood, you will want what nature once so bountifully supplied and man so thoughtlessly destroyed. And because of that want, you will

reproach us, not for what we have used, but for what we have wasted. . . . [A]ny nation which in its youth lives only for the day, reaps without sowing, and consumes without husbanding, must expect the penalty of the prodigal. . . .

The people I met in South Carolina and Georgia, along with a huge majority of Americans nationwide, know that climate change is real. They see it happening in their lives, and they want us to take action. It is time for Congress to listen to their voices. It is time for Congress to listen to the fishermen who see the fisheries moving around and the oceans warming. It is time for us to listen to the clambers at the seashore who see the changes in the sea level and know what it means for them. It is time for us to listen to the foresters who see the pine beetle killing forests by the hundreds of square miles, and the firefighters who fight fires in those forests who see the fire season expanding by 60 days. It is time for us to listen to the farmers who see unprecedented drought and flooding. It is time for Congress to listen to the voices of their constituents before we all, in our foolishness and in our folly, must pay the penalty of the prodigal. Indeed, it is time for Congress to wake up.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Kansas.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Mr. MORAN. Mr. President, I spoke yesterday on the Senate floor about my concerns with the nature of the way the Department of Veterans Affairs is being operated. Much of my concern occurred as a result of conversations I have had with veterans back home in Kansas and their experiences both on the benefit and medical side—some real concerns with individual examples of what has happened in some of our VA facilities in our State, and this growing sense that the Department of Veterans Affairs has become unable, unwilling, to provide the necessary services in a cost-effective, efficient, timely manner that our veterans so deserve.

As I indicated yesterday, there is no group of people I hold in higher regard than those who have served our country and believe that the benefits that were promised our veterans must be provided to them, and I am concerned that is no longer the case.

I also indicated yesterday that I have served on the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee for now 18 years. I was the chairman of the health care subcommittee. I have worked with nine secretaries of the Department of Veterans Affairs. During that time I always had the sense, until the last few years, that things were always getting better for our veterans. Today, the frustration that I bring to share with my colleagues is the belief that many veterans no longer have hope that the

Department of Veterans Affairs is there to meet their needs and to care for them.

In preparing for those remarks yesterday—but really in studying this issue over the last several years—there is a real shocking development, which is the number of times we hear stories, incidents, facts about what is going on with our veterans at the Department of Veterans Affairs and the services being provided. Just to highlight to my colleagues, based upon inspector general reports that are then, in part, based upon press reports, are some things we have seen and heard about the Department of Veterans Affairs and their efforts to care for America's veterans.

The one that is in the news at the moment—there is an additional IG report that is being anticipated—the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Hospital administration apparently developed a secret waiting list of up to 1,600 sick veterans who were forced to wait months to see a doctor. It is believed that at least 40 U.S. veterans died waiting for their appointment as a result of being placed on the secret waiting list. Again, this is being investigated, a report is expected, and we will see what that report says. But, clearly, this is one of huge concern, resulting in potentially the death of veterans.

There is a wait time cover-up. According to the GAO—the Government Accountability Office—last year, quoting them:

It's unclear how long an appointment has been delayed because no one can really give you accurate information . . . It is so bad that [GAO staff] have found evidence that VA hospitals tried to cover up wait times, fudged numbers, and backdated delayed appointments in an effort to make things appear better than they are. In addition, the GAO states that "nothing has been implemented that we know of at this point" despite the fact that the GAO and the VA Inspector General "reported similar findings for over a decade."

Reports of falsifying records were stored in the VA clinic at Fort Collins, CO, where the VA's Office of Medical Inspector found that "clerks were instructed on how to falsify appointment records so it appeared the small staff of doctors was seeing patients within the agency's goal of 14 days." In fact, the investigation determined that clerical staff at the Colorado clinic were punished if they allowed records to reflect that a veteran waited longer than 14 days. Let me say that again. In fact, the investigators determined that clerical staff at the Colorado clinic were punished if they allowed records to reflect that a veteran waited longer than 14 days.

No oversight in quality of care. In December, the GAO reported on VA hospitals finding that patients were not being protected from doctors who have historically provided substandard treatment. None of the hospitals examined by the GAO in Dallas, Nashville, Seattle, and Augusta, ME, adhered to all of the requirements to review and adequately identify providers who are

able to deliver safe, quality patient care.

In Los Angeles in 2012, more than 40,000 requests for diagnoses were "administratively closed" and essentially purged from the books so reported wait times would be dropped. In Dallas in 2012 another 13,000 appointments were canceled. According to the Washington Examiner, the VA canceled more than 1.5 million medical orders with no guarantee that the patients actually received the treatment or that the tests that were required by those orders were given.

By the VA's own admission in an April of 2014 fact sheet, cancer screening delays accounted for the deaths of at least 23 patients in VA facilities nationwide, and another 53 patients suffered from some type of harm due to improper care. Reports have also linked poor patient care, maintenance issues, and unsanitary practices to at least six preventable deaths in Columbia, SC, five in Pittsburgh, four in Atlanta, and three each in Memphis and Augusta, GA.

Other reports:

More than 1,800 veteran patients in the St. Louis VA Medical Center may have been exposed to HIV and hepatitis as a result of unsanitary dental equipment. The facility has remained under fire for patient deaths, persistent patient safety issues, and critical reports. Despite the problems at the medical center, the facilities director from 2000 to 2013 received nearly \$25,000 in bonuses during her tenure there.

CNN reported that after they obtained VA internal documents that deal with patients diagnosed with cancer in 2010 and 2011, at least 19 veterans died because of delays in simple medical screenings such as colonoscopies or endoscopies at various VA hospitals or clinics. Let me say that again. In 2010 and 2011, 19 veterans died because of delays in getting simple medical screenings related to cancer. The veterans were part of 82 vets who have died or are dying or have suffered serious injuries as a result of delayed diagnosis or treatment.

Loopholes in VA performance. An Iraq and Afghanistan combat vet, who is also a former mental health administrator at the VA Medical Center in Manchester, NH, said in April 2012 that VA hospital managers across the country regularly sought loopholes to get around meeting performance requirements. He explained that "meeting a performance target, rather than meeting the needs of the veteran, becomes the overriding priority in providing care." He went on to say that "offering bonuses to managers to make sure they met performance requirements creates a perverse administrative incentive to find and exploit loopholes . . . that will allow the facility to meet its numbers without actually providing the services or meeting the expectation the measure dictates."

Finally, this one. It is not from the inspector general's report. But in a

hearing before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on April 9—about a month ago—the deputy for the VA inspector general for health care inspections stated:

I believe that the VA has lost its focus on the importance of providing quality medical care as its primary mission. . . . There is no good explanation for these events. They are not consistent with good medical practice, they're not consistent with common sense and they're not consistent with VA policies that exist.

It is amazing to me—it is so troubling to me—we have these reports over a long period of time across the country—not isolated incidents. It is even more troubling to me—despite these reports, these inspections, these criticisms of the VA—it is hard to find any evidence the VA is doing anything to improve its record, its performance, or to better care for the veterans of our country. We should demand more, and we need leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs that will do so.

As I indicated yesterday, I do not believe this is a matter of money. There has been a 60-percent increase in VA spending since 2009—normal increases of 2, 3, or 4 percent each year over the last several years. As I indicated yesterday, the President himself talked about how successful the administration has been in providing the necessary resources for the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Our veterans deserve better care and treatment. These are the folks we ought to honor and esteem. These are the people who we must live up to with our commitments to provide the benefits and health care they deserve and have earned.

If these were isolated instances, they would be a terrible thing. But because they are so pervasive, because they are so widespread, and because there appears to be no effort to correct the problems, it is important—it is critical—that Congress and the American people demand better service, care, and treatment for our Nation's heroes.

I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. FRANKEN. 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. FRANKEN. Mr. President, I wish to speak today as in morning business.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senate is currently in morning business.

STUDENT LOAN DEBT

Mr. FRANKEN. Thank you, Mr. President.

I rise today to talk about the growing problem of student debt and the college affordability crisis that is gripping our Nation. I also rise to talk about one of the things we need to do