

low. EPA fines are at a 25-year low. Restrictions on new coal plants have been eliminated. Limits on methane pollution are in the process of being rolled back. In other words, polluters are getting their way. That is great news for people who own oil and gas companies, but it is horrible news for people with asthma, for farmers who are trying to get through the worst drought season seen in a century, and for small businesses that are losing customers because of fires.

Listen, climate change is here. It is hurting everything from local economies, to public health, to national security, and the Republicans have decided that the best person to lead the Agency to do something about it is a coal lobbyist. It would be funny if it were not so outrageous.

The Democrats have a plan for climate change. We have ideas to invest in clean air, clean water, and smarter infrastructure. We have bills on investment and production tax credits, solar energy, wind energy, conservation and efficiency, carbon pricing, and planting trees, and we have stood together against nominations like this one. It is time for the Republicans, if not to stand with us, to at least then stand on the other side against us and engage in this great debate. What are we going to do with climate change? We have proposals, and they have none.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Georgia.

DISASTER RELIEF

Mr. PERDUE. Mr. President, I rise to talk about a crisis in my home State and indeed five other States across the Southeast. I rise to talk about disasters in California and to talk about our friends in Puerto Rico.

On October 10, 2018, Hurricane Michael made landfall on the Florida Panhandle as a category 4 hurricane. It was one of the strongest storms to ever hit the United States. Over the next few hours, Hurricane Michael barreled through Florida and tore through southwest Georgia. In a matter of minutes, homes were flattened, tracks of timber were destroyed, and farmers' crops lay down in the field. People's lives were radically affected forever.

This hurricane hit at exactly the time of year when most crops were ready for harvest. It doesn't matter if they were peanuts, cotton, or pecans—they were all just beautiful this year. As a matter of fact, in the State of Georgia, I grew up working on our family's farm there, and I have to say the cotton crop last year was probably the best I had ever seen. It was almost cruel. Today, agriculture is Georgia's top industry and our No. 1 economic driver. Before the hurricane, farmers in my State were expecting a record harvest. Instead, their crops were completely destroyed.

Shortly after the hurricane hit, President Trump, Vice President PENCE, and Secretary of Agriculture Perdue all came down to Georgia. To-

gether, we toured the devastation and heard from farmers and local officials about the tough road of recovery ahead. Some farmers said they could clean up, replant, and have a crop next year as long as they had adequate resources. Other farmers were not so lucky.

Georgia is the top pecan-producing State in the country. One of our largest pecan farms is owned by two brothers in Bainbridge, which the Vice President and I personally visited. We personally saw the damage in their fields. Some 800 acres of pecan trees were gone. I cannot describe to you what that looks like. On the ground was a solid carpet—if you can imagine this—of mature, beautiful, inch-long pecans that were ready to be harvested but were on the ground, ruined.

One brother said:

The farmer in me wants to farm this land, but there's no way I can make it. Next year is the year I'll lose it, because we're not like the cotton guy. Nothing against them, but they get to replant a seed next year and have a crop. I don't.

The problem is that the pecan crop can be annually insured, but there is no insurance product for insuring pecan trees. If these two brothers replant, it could take 7 to 10 years for the trees to mature enough to even generate a minimum revenue. Most likely, full production would take over 12 years. For them, this is truly a generational loss.

The other brother said:

My brother and I built this business from nothing. We will make it. We may not be in the pecan business anymore, but we will be doing something else. We are fighters. [Our families are committed to this land.] You just have to go on.

When they saw the devastation, President Trump and Vice President PENCE stepped up to the plate and made a commitment to our agriculture community.

President Trump said: "Farmers really got hurt here, especially in Georgia, but we're going to get it taken care of."

Vice President PENCE said:

We will rebuild these crops and these communities. We will restore southwest Georgia. We will restore the Sunbelt region bigger and better than ever before.

This afternoon, I am here to say that the Vice President and the President are living up to their word. After this disaster relief was caught up in the political nightmare of funding the last 25 percent of this year's budget, we now have the opportunity to put this stand-alone supplemental appropriations bill on the floor of the Senate. The President and Vice President have been absolutely resolute in their support of getting aid to the victims of these disasters. They are now asking Congress to pass this all-inclusive disaster relief bill right now.

The State of Georgia has already stepped up and offered tax credits, short-term financing, and other forms of direct assistance to those who have

been impacted, but they have only scratched the surface. The people of Georgia have come together and helped their neighbors, served meals to each other, and assisted first responders in their recovery efforts.

In Florida alone, then-Governor RICK SCOTT, who is now our colleague here on the Senate floor, was in the race for this Senate seat, and he actually suspended his campaign to devote all of his time, in his responsibility as the Governor, to lead the effort of analyzing the damage in Florida and determining what needed to be done. He can speak directly to the need. He is a co-sponsor of this bill, I might add.

However, despite efforts by Senator ISAKSON and others and me in our State, this Senate body has yet to take action on disaster relief for the agriculture community in the Southeast. Our farmers simply cannot wait any longer. The situation in my State is dire. I would say it is the same across the South. Because revenue from the 2018 harvest was destroyed, bankers can't lend money to farmers who right now are asking to borrow money to put seed in the ground, to fertilize the ground, and to prepare the ground for next year's crop. It is as simple as that. Growers cannot replant because they can't get their financial houses in order because we haven't adopted a resolution for last year's harvest that they were not able to achieve. Rural communities are suffering, and in many places, economic activity is at an absolute standstill as it waits for the Federal Government—this body and the House of Representatives—to do its job.

For some in my State, the timing of assistance is not just a matter of putting a crop in the ground this year; it is a matter of potentially never putting a crop in the ground again. If we do not help these people right now, they may lose their businesses and livelihoods through no fault of their own. That is the reality we are facing here. The people in my State have asked me to utilize every sphere of influence, turn over every stone, and exhaust all options to get disaster relief right now.

We are past the time when this should have gotten done. I have spoken with the President many times about this. His commitment to our farmers is unwavering. Just last Monday night, he said: DAVID, get it done. He called me again on Saturday night before he left for Vietnam. He said: DAVID, what do we have to do to get this bill across the Senate floor? Talk to our friends in the House, and make sure that everything that is needed is in.

Senator ISAKSON, I, and several other Senators have introduced a supplemental disaster relief bill on the floor of the Senate, and President Trump has agreed to sign it. Our bill includes disaster relief for agriculture. It also provides additional funds for Georgia and other States like Florida, Alabama, the Carolinas, Alaska, Hawaii, and California that have battled natural disasters over the last year on

their own. It also builds on the Trump administration's past efforts and includes the remaining funding for Puerto Rico.

Both the House and Senate have previously supported similar proposals. They should be even more inclined to do so now that it is not tied up with the overall 2019 budget drama. This is a standalone supplemental bill that includes those things that people on both sides of this body agreed to and voted for just last year. This bipartisan package is a win for our farmers. It is a win for families and businesses that were devastated by historic hurricanes in the Southeast and wildfires in the West. It is a win for the people of Puerto Rico whom the President has previously helped. He was committed to including that in this bill.

I sincerely hope this body will move quickly and pass this disaster relief bill without further delay. I humbly ask each of my colleagues in this body for their individual support and for their vote in this disaster relief package that will save hundreds, if not thousands, of farming families in my home State from having to give up what they love, and that is farming the land that in many cases they inherited from their families. In other cases, people who graduated from HBCUs—some of our brightest young people—borrowed money to buy the land or are leasing the land, and they are in danger of losing this dream of making a living on the ground in Georgia.

Our country and our people are counting on us to get this done, and time is of the essence.

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.

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

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

NOMINATION OF ANDREW WHEELER

Ms. DUCKWORTH. Mr. President, I come to the floor in opposition to Andrew Wheeler's nomination to lead the Environmental Protection Agency.

Americans across this country depend on EPA to protect their public health, yet under this administration, EPA has failed again and again to reassure my constituents that their basic rights to breathe in clean air and sip clean water are being prioritized.

Listen, I am proud that EPA's Region 5 office is headquartered in Chicago. Region 5 has led the country in enforcing the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and other bedrock environmental policies that Congress has passed. But under Mr. Wheeler and this administration, EPA has made it harder for the scientists, engineers, and public health experts in Region 5 to do their jobs.

EPA is severely understaffed and underfunded, and in 2018, major enforcement actions dropped to their lowest

levels in more than 10 years. Last year, EPA competed fewer than 11,000 inspections and evaluations of polluters across the country—the lowest number in almost two decades.

In 2018, EPA sent just 123 civil pollution violation cases to the Justice Department for prosecution. That is about 40 percent less than the annual average during the Obama administration. So, sadly, it should come as no surprise that a report from the Environmental Integrity Project this month found that communities across the country are now being put at risk of exposure to dangerous contaminants.

To make matters worse, the EPA's enforcement workforce has been shrinking for years, and the Trump administration wants to cut it back even further.

These cutbacks are leaving communities, especially low-income communities and those of color, exposed to public health risks. Meanwhile, polluters are being let off the hook for serious violations of the law.

I have seen firsthand what happens when EPA fails to enforce our laws and protect public health. It causes fear and confusion. For months, residents in Willowbrook, IL, have lived in fear that the air they breathe in has been making their family sick.

Here is a little background. A facility in their community has been releasing cancer-causing emissions for decades. Unfortunately, even since EPA discovered just how toxic this chemical was years ago—years ago—they have refused to issue new regulations updating safety standards based on the latest science.

Making matters even worse, EPA officials refused to notify local public health or elected officials about their discovery, leaving communities in the dark even while their health is at risk, leaving more families more likely to get sick, leaving more children more likely to die.

As a mother, this is heartbreaking. As a Senator, this is outrageous.

When Willowbrook residents first started to raise concerns, EPA wasn't the least bit transparent. The Agency had to be pushed by Senator DURBIN, other Members of the Illinois congressional delegation, and me just to hold community forums.

My office also received alarming information alleging that senior political appointees instructed EPA personnel not to inspect any facility in Region 5 that emits the same carcinogen found at this facility. If true, this type of political interference is beyond unacceptable. If true, it is happening on Mr. Wheeler's watch.

I have asked EPA to take several steps to fix this crisis, and I am still waiting for their response.

In the absence of leadership from EPA, Senator DURBIN and I have authored two pieces of legislation to ensure that this kind of crisis never happens again.

Here is what Gabriela, a resident of Willowbrook, said when she saw the list of health problems associated with this facility: "It was like reading our medical history."

Since she moved to her home in 2009, Gabriela has suffered from intense headaches, dizziness, nausea, inability to concentrate, and memory loss. She has found it difficult to read through briefs and almost instantly forgets movie plots and even some conversations.

Both of her children, who have lived in the house for most of their lives, have had respiratory problems since they were little. Her 12-year-old daughter has often coughed to the point of vomiting and has developed a bone cyst.

One of her 9-year-old daughter's classmates was recently diagnosed with leukemia, as was Gabriella's next-door neighbor, an otherwise healthy man in his early fifties.

Another woman I have gotten to know from Willowbrook is named Neringa. She told me that when she and her husband were moving to Chicago 5 years ago, they picked their home because it seemed like a place where their children would be safe.

She went on:

You look for sexual predators, good schools, taxes. You don't think you would have to look at air and water. You feel like it is the one thing in our country we wouldn't have to think about.

Exposure from toxic pollution is a matter of life and death for these residents. It was uncovered only when career civil servants did their job and flagged a risk they observed in a routine model that EPA publishes.

I am extremely concerned that other areas in Illinois could face similar issues and that other kids in other communities could be breathing in air full of cancer-causing chemicals when they are playing on the swings at recess or walking home from school later that afternoon.

I need EPA to respond to the requests I have made on behalf of Lake County and actually conduct the kind of monitoring that exposed the problem in Willowbrook there and in every community that may be at risk.

Not far from Willowbrook, residents in Chicago have also been facing several public health threats for decades.

Chicago, IL, is the birthplace of Hazel Johnson, the "Mother of the Environmental Justice Movement," a pioneer of environmental justice activism on the South Side of Chicago.

She founded People for Community Recovery in 1979 in an effort to get asbestos out of the buildings in her community. Soon she managed to trace air and water pollution in her community to nearby industry, which was using the predominantly lower income African-American community as a dumping ground.

Hazel Johnson knew what I know: Every American has a right to breathe in safe air, drink clean water, and live