

diplomatic efforts. I understand committee staff received a classified briefing just yesterday. I look forward to hearing from the State Department's top career diplomat at the Republican lunch today. I hope my colleagues across the aisle rethink their decision to turn down his offer to brief them. I understand the administration will be sending up interagency teams this week to brief the oversight committees in a classified setting, as well.

For our part, the Senate will consider several measures in the coming days that will directly impact our presence and influence in this troubled region, including arms sales to key regional partners, as well as the NDAA. I urge every one of my colleagues to keep these deadly serious developments at the top of our minds as we attend to our business in the days ahead.

HONG KONG

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, last week I spoke about the people's uprising in Hong Kong. Over the past several days, millions of residents have taken to the streets to defend their autonomy and the rule of law from continued encroachment of the communist government of mainland China.

After days of tension, this past weekend brought some good news. In a sign that the people's demonstrations had sent a clear message, Hong Kong officials now said that the government will suspend consideration of the proposed "extradition" bill indefinitely.

The fate of Hong Kong and its special status is a subject I have watched carefully for decades. Early on in my Senate tenure, I introduced the legislation that still governs our relationship with Hong Kong, the U.S.-Hong Kong Policy Act of 1992, which President Bush 41 signed into law. On the day I introduced that legislation, I said it was heartening to see that "democracy is finally gaining a tenuous foothold in Hong Kong."

Well, the nearly 30 years since then have shown us all just what the people of Hong Kong can do when the terms of their independence and freedom are respected. We have seen Hong Kong thrive, in large measure due to the political and economic freedoms and stable rule of law that Hong Kong's special status has enabled, but we have also seen clearly in recent days that freedom's foothold in the shadow of mainland China is not a given. It remains tenuous even now.

I wanted to again express my admiration for the people of Hong Kong and their strong but peaceful response to this proposed encroachment. I am glad to see their leaders respect their willingness to stand their ground, and I hope the city's authorities will continue to respect the clear will of the people on these issues moving forward.

JOHN S. MCCAIN NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on a related subject, all of these events I have discussed, from Iran's misbehavior to China's aggressiveness, underscore one thing very clearly: The United States needs to remain engaged, prepared, and powerful.

We need to leave zero doubt among our friends and allies, our most violent foes, and everybody in between that while the United States does not seek conflict, we must be prepared to decisively defeat our adversaries if conflict is forced upon us. That is called deterrence.

The growing global unrest should be a lesson to us as the Senate gets ready to turn to the National Defense Authorization Act later this week. I know my colleagues on both sides share my hope that this year's NDAA can build on the successes of the past 2 years.

Our first obligation to the American people is to ensure for their defense. It is essential that we continue rebuilding our military by authorizing sufficient support to modernize and sustain the advantages that America's all-voluntary Armed Forces have over our adversaries.

Working with the Trump administration in recent years, we have been able to end a chapter of harmful spending cuts that have left military leaders less able to address emerging challenges. As a result, last year's legislation—named for our dear colleague, the late John McCain—authorized the largest year-on-year increase in defense spending in 15 years.

The bill introduced last week is a step further toward implementing our important new national defense strategy, toward renewing the readiness and lethality of our forces, and toward making sure that we never ask brave American men and women to step into harm's way without all possible tools and training to help them succeed. This crucial legislation has a chance to be a major bipartisan success story of this Congress. It is already off to an encouraging start, having been voted out of the Armed Services Committee by an overwhelming bipartisan margin.

And it is easy to see why. As great-power competitors like Russia and China continue to challenge U.S. interests, this NDAA will help to maintain and expand our alliances and partnerships, along with our ability to stand firm.

The bill puts readiness front and center. In recent decades, our most formidable competitors have taken every opportunity to deploy new technological threats. Keeping American and allied servicemembers out of harm's way means keeping up with these developments and outpacing them.

The bill takes steps to expand oversight and increase efficiency at the Pentagon. It honors the tremendous sacrifices made by servicemembers and their families by securing the largest pay raise in a decade, along with several other important reforms.

TAXPAYER FIRST ACT

Mr. McCONNELL. Madam President, on one final matter. I want to celebrate another legislative accomplishment the Senate notched last week.

On Thursday, the Senate passed the Taxpayer First Act and sent it to President Trump's desk to become law. This legislation is the most thorough package of reforms to the Internal Revenue Service in 20 years.

Let me say that again. The Senate just passed the most significant reforms to the IRS in two decades. It will create a new, independent process for appeals to ensure taxpayers receive fair treatment. During dispute resolutions, taxpayers will now get access to the same information the IRS has.

There will be more accountability within the IRS when it comes to cyber security, careful management of technology, and overall efficiency. There will be a new streamlined system for addressing identity theft. There will be better procedures for advance notification in the event of an audit or an asset seizure, and there will be new steps to make it easier to file your taxes and supporting documents online.

So this is a significant accomplishment. These reforms will make one of the least appealing annual tasks for hard-working Americans a little bit less painful.

A year and a half ago, the Republican Members of this body joined with House Republicans and President Trump to deliver historic tax cuts and tax reform to the American people. Middle-class families, parents, small business owners, farmers, and job creators across the Nation are keeping more of what they earn and sending less to the IRS.

Now, thanks to this latest achievement, the IRS will be just a little bit easier to deal with as well.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

AGRICULTURE

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, our economy is thriving. Republican economic policies, particularly the historic tax reform legislation that we passed at the end of 2017, have helped to produce economic growth, higher wages, and better opportunities for workers.

Unfortunately, our Nation's agriculture economy is trailing behind the economy as a whole. A combination of natural disasters, low commodity prices, and protracted trade disputes have left farmers and ranchers and rural businesses struggling. Although

2019 crop prices have improved, millions of acres of cropland will go unplanted and leave many farmers with no crops to market this year.

Farmers and ranchers have a tough job. Feeding our Nation and the world is tough, backbreaking work. Farmers and ranchers put in long days that start before the Sun rises and often end long after the Sun sets. Yet, no matter how hard they work, all of their labor can be undone by one devastating storm or flood. For most Americans, a bad storm might mean a wet or a delayed commute. For farmers and ranchers, it can literally mean the loss of substantial parts of their livelihoods.

I am proud to represent South Dakota's hard-working farmers and ranchers in the Senate, and addressing their needs is one of my biggest priorities here in Washington. Right now, I am working on several fronts to expand economic opportunity for farmers and ranchers and help them access the support they need.

I recently requested a meeting with the Department of Agriculture to discuss cover crop harvest flexibility on prevent plant acres, Market Facilitation Program payments, and Conservation Reserve Program signups. Last Thursday, the Deputy Agriculture Secretary—the second highest ranking official at the Department of Agriculture—and the USDA Under Secretary for Farm Production and Conservation came to my office to meet with me on these issues.

One important topic of discussion was of moving up the November 1 date for haying or grazing cover crops planted on prevented plant acres. South Dakota's farmers and ranchers are currently facing the fallout from severe winter storms, heavy rainfall, bomb cyclones, and spring flooding. Planting is behind schedule, and some farmers' fields are so flooded that they won't be able to plant at all this year. The situation is similar throughout the entire Midwest. As a result, many farmers are thinking about planting quick-growing cover crops on their prevent plant acres for feed and grazing, once their fields finally dry out, in order to protect the soil from erosion.

Yet there is a problem. Right now, the Department of Agriculture doesn't allow farmers to harvest or graze cover crops on prevent plant acres or to use them for pasture until November 1. Farmers who hay or graze before this date face a reduction in their prevent plant payments, which is crop insurance to help them cover their income losses when fields can't be planted due to flooding or other issues. November 1 is generally a pretty reasonable date for farmers in Southern States, but in Northern States like South Dakota, November 1 is too late for harvesting thanks to the risk of snow and other late fall or early winter storms.

It is also too late to maximize the use of cover crops for pasture since the ground can freeze before cover crops

are fully grazed. Due to last year's severe and lengthy winter, feed supplies have disappeared and have left no reserves. Corn stalks, which are a source of grazing and bedding, will be in short supply this year, which will result in severe feed shortages and a need for additional roughage. That is why I have been pressing the Department of Agriculture to move this date up for farmers in the Northern States. Cover crops are a win-win situation and can reduce feed shortages for many livestock producers. They help the environment by preventing soil erosion, which can pollute streams and rivers and worsen flooding, and they benefit farmers by improving soil health, which improves future crop yields.

It is important that we don't discourage farmers from planting cover crops by insisting on the November 1 harvest date, and I emphasized that point to the Deputy Secretary and the Under Secretary. I know the Department of Agriculture is looking at this issue right now, and I will continue to encourage the Department to reach a decision that addresses the reality that is faced by northern farmers.

Another subject I raised at the meeting last week was of the Conservation Reserve Program signups. All farmers are familiar with the Conservation Reserve Program, or CRP, as we refer to it, which provides incentives for farmers to take environmentally sensitive land out of production for 10 to 15 years.

The Conservation Reserve Program helps the environment by improving soil health and water quality and by providing habitat for wildlife, including endangered and threatened species. It also helps farmers by reducing their crop insurance costs and providing them with an annual payment for the land they have taken out of production.

I have spent years pushing for an increase in the Conservation Reserve Program's acreage cap, and we finally got a substantial increase in last year's farm bill. Yet the Department of Agriculture needs to expedite both general and continuous CRP signups to allow farmers to take full advantage of the cap increase. Taking millions of acres of land out of crop production in the next year could have a big impact on the farm economy by driving up commodity prices, which will boost farms' incomes. In order for this to happen, we need to make sure that farmers can get their less productive land enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program and out of crop production by next year. That is why I have been urging the Department of Agriculture to make sure farmers can sign up in a timely manner.

I also urged the Department to expedite signups for the Soil Health and Income Protection Program. I introduced the Soil Health and Income Protection Program, which became law as part of last year's farm bill, in order to address the concerns of farmers who were

interested in the Conservation Reserve Program but didn't want to take portions of their land out of production for a decade or more. The Soil Health and Income Protection Program, or SHIPP, provides a new, short-term option for farmers that will allow them to take their worst performing cropland out of production for 3 to 5 years instead of the 10 to 15 years that is required by the CRP's rules. Like the CRP, it will protect our environment while it will improve the bottom line for farmers. The sooner we get this program implemented, the sooner farmers and the environment will see the benefits.

I have also been pressing the USDA to issue guidelines for the second round of Market Facilitation Program payments, and I emphasized this point again at last Thursday's meeting. While I know our farmers would rather receive a check from the marketplace than from the government, we have safety net programs in place to help in exactly the kinds of situations our farmers find themselves in today.

I continue to press the administration on when the government will wrap up negotiations on the various trade deals that are under consideration. I strongly support the administration's goal of strengthening market access for our Nation's farmers and ranchers, and we have made real progress in those negotiations. Now it is time to push for a conclusion to these deals.

In addition to increased market access, farmers and ranchers need certainty about what international markets will look like. I am also pushing for the congressional consideration of one already concluded trade agreement—the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement—in the near future. This agreement will preserve and expand farmers' and ranchers' market access to Canada and Mexico, and Congress should take it up and pass it as soon as possible.

To all of South Dakota's farmers and ranchers, I know you all have had a very tough few years. I am working hard here in Washington to do whatever I can to support you, and I will keep fighting every day to get our agriculture economy thriving again.

I yield the floor.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The senior assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

MOTION TO DISCHARGE—S.J. RES.

36

Mr. MENENDEZ. Madam President, pursuant to the Arms Export Control Act of 1976, I move to discharge the Foreign Relations Committee from further consideration of S.J. Res. 36, relating to the disapproval of the proposed transfer to the Kingdom of Saudi