

standards for pears are no longer needed to assure the high quality of exporting pears. The USDA supports enactment of H.R. 609. As world economies improve and areas of trade continue to decrease, new market opportunities for fresh pears arise. In order to provide the flexibility to meet the requirements of these new opportunities, H.R. 609 should be passed, and I would urge that my colleagues support this legislation.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 609, which updates the Apple and Pear Export Act. For many years, the Apple and Pear Export Act served pear growers well by ensuring a quality product to consumers overseas. The pear industry is now seeking greater flexibility to sell its product in emerging markets around the world.

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Recently, the sale of 200,000 cartons of pears to Russia was made possible by a January, 1997, amendment to the act that allowed for the shipment of a more competitive grade of pears to that country. Our farmers are increasingly dependent on foreign markets. It is therefore essential that regulations governing the agricultural industry be designed to help producers compete in those markets.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this regulatory improvement that will give pear growers greater flexibility to market their product.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from Oregon (Mr. WALDEN), the gentleman who sponsored this bill and has done a great job in just a few weeks of getting this bill moved forward. We appreciate and commend his work.

Mr. WALDEN of Oregon. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Texas (Chairman COMBEST) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) for their support of this legislation, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this measure.

Mr. Speaker, H.R. 609 will help expand export markets for our Nation's pear growers. The Export Apple and Pear Act passed in 1933 required that apples and pears meet certain standards prior to export to ensure that only the top quality pears and apples were exported.

The United States Department of Agriculture has stated that, because of private contractual arrangements between buyers and sellers, increasingly those arrangements are controlling the quality of U.S. pear exports. The USDA believes that mandatory Federal quality standards, as currently established under the act, are no longer needed to assure the high quality of exported pears.

As new markets have opened up in the last decade, opportunities for sale of lower grade and less expensive pears have arisen. Because of the 1933 act, U.S. producers and exporters of pears have been unable to meet the demand for lower grade pears in other countries without receiving a waiver of the act from USDA.

The pear industry has on two occasions over the past decade petitioned and received a waiver from the USDA to sell non-U.S. Grade Number One and Fancy Grade winter pears in the emerging markets of Central and South America and Russia. The waiver for Russia allowed the industry to sell 200,000 cartons of pears to that Nation in 1997. Past experience indicates that when these markets can afford it, they will move on to purchase our higher grade fruit.

As world economies improve and barriers to trade continue to decrease, new market opportunities for fresh pears arise. This legislation will allow our pear growers to get a foothold in emerging foreign markets. In order to provide the flexibility to meet the requirements of these two opportunities without having to seek new exemptions, the fresh pear industry is seeking to be removed from the 1933 Export Apple and Pear Act.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation, as I mentioned, has the support of the USDA, pear industry and is not opposed by the apple industry. Furthermore, the Congressional Budget Office has determined that this legislation would not impose any costs on the Federal Government. H.R. 609 is sound policy that allows U.S. pear growers and exporters the flexibility to compete in emerging foreign markets.

Mr. Speaker, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on this important legislation to our pear growers, especially those of the Northwest, and I commend and thank the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) of the House Committee on Agriculture for passage of this measure to the floor.

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I have no further requests for time, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 609.

The question was taken.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, on that I demand the yeas and nays.

The yeas and nays were ordered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to clause 8 of rule XX and the Chair's prior announcement, further proceedings on this motion will be postponed.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members

may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on the bill just considered.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Texas?

There was no objection.

NULLIFYING RESERVATION OF FUNDS FOR GUARANTEED LOANS UNDER CONSOLIDATED FARM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACT

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the bill (H.R. 882) to nullify any reservation of funds during fiscal year 1999 for guaranteed loans under the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act for qualified beginning farmers or ranchers, and for other purposes.

The Clerk read as follows:

H.R. 882

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. NULLIFICATION OF RESERVATION OF FUNDS DURING FISCAL YEAR 1999 FOR GUARANTEED LOANS UNDER THE CONSOLIDATED FARM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACT FOR QUALIFIED BEGINNING FARMERS OR RANCHERS.

Amounts shall be made available pursuant to section 346(b)(1)(D) of the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act for guaranteed loans, without regard to any reservation under section 346(b)(2)(B) of such Act.

SEC. 2. QUALIFIED BEGINNING FARMERS AND RANCHERS TO BE GIVEN PRIORITY IN MAKING GUARANTEED LOANS UNDER THE CONSOLIDATED FARM AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT ACT FROM SUPPLEMENTAL APPROPRIATIONS FOR FISCAL YEAR 1999.

In making guaranteed loans under the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act from funds made available pursuant to any Act making supplemental appropriations for fiscal year 1999, the Secretary of Agriculture shall, to the extent practicable, give priority to making such loans to qualified beginning farmers and ranchers (as defined in section 343(a)(11) of such Act).

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST).

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I bring to the floor a bill, H.R. 882. This bill costs nothing but will provide immediate relief to the Nation's farmers and ranchers who are today experiencing a serious credit crunch brought on by natural disasters and low commodity prices.

I am pleased to be joined by the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM), the ranking Democrat on the Committee on Agriculture, as well as the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. BARRETT), the gentleman from Minnesota (Mr. MINGE), and a number of other Members in introducing this measure.

Our bill is simple and straightforward. Currently, funds for guaranteed ownership loans are exhausted in

more than half of the States. Money for guaranteed operating loans with interest assistance has dried up in most of the Corn Belt States and several others as well. There is simply no money currently available for those farmers desperately needing credit assistance now.

Meanwhile, there is approximately \$470 million in loan guarantee funds sitting in the Department of Agriculture that has gone unused and will continue to go unused for another month unless Congress acts. By law, these funds are tied up until April 1, 1999, for the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers program, a worthwhile program that is nonetheless not being tapped at this time.

This bill simply releases these unused funds one month early to enable the Secretary of Agriculture to meet the very immediate need for guaranteed loans in farm communities.

Mr. Speaker, while this bill is very important, I do want to advise my colleagues that it does nothing to eliminate or in any way diminish the tremendous need for the supplemental appropriations for agriculture requested last week by the President. This bill is only a stopgap measure to temporarily fill an immediate need that simply cannot wait for a supplemental appropriation.

In short, the demand for credit is now. As many of my colleagues know, American farmers and ranchers borrow more money every year than most us will borrow in a lifetime, only to risk it all. Sometimes the gamble pays off, and sometimes it does not. Last year, for many of America's farmers, it did not. As a result, cash-strapped farmers who have already made their planting decisions for the coming growing season desperately require cash in-hand right now to make another go of it.

This is the immediate short-term problem our bill would address if enacted quickly.

Again, this bill does not cost the U.S. Treasury any additional money. The funds in question have already been appropriated. In addition, I want my colleagues to know that this measure enjoys the support of the administration and a broad bipartisan support in the Congress.

Mr. Speaker, for these reasons, I urge immediate passage of H.R. 882.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 882 and urge its passage by the House. H.R. 882 would provide available guaranteed loan funds to farmers and ranchers currently working with their local lenders to ready their finances for planting or in deciding whether to keep their livestock herds intact.

The Department of Agriculture is projecting they will run out of guaranteed operating funds nationwide by March the 15, with interest assisted operating loan funds depleted by the end

of this week. Many of my colleagues may already be receiving phone calls from constituents who are getting ready to plant and need to buy seed, but they have been told there are no USDA loan funds available so they cannot go out and buy their needed inputs.

H.R. 882 would speed up the needed release of available guaranteed loan funds that have been reserved for beginning farmers and ranchers until April 1. Since we are not certain when a supplemental spending bill may be approved by the Congress, we could face a situation where ag producers are left without the ability to purchase needed inputs.

H.R. 882 will provide a bridge to agriculture producers and lenders until we are able to provide additional credit funds and supplemental appropriations legislation. While it does help by providing needed credit that is already available on a more timely basis, it does not do away with the need for Congress to act on this front.

This is especially true since H.R. 882 only deals with the guaranteed loan programs and does not help ease the immediate need for additional emergency loan funds and the pending need for additional direct operating and ownership loan funds.

Mr. Speaker, again, I urge my colleagues to support this modest, fiscally responsible step to help ease the financial strain facing our farmers and ranchers as well as their hometown banks and local communities.

Mr. Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from Nebraska (Mr. BARRETT), chairman of the Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities, Resource Conservation, and Credit of the House Committee on Agriculture.

Mr. BARRETT of Nebraska. Mr. Speaker, I rise today in support of H.R. 882, which is a bill to provide some stopgap funding for some guaranteed loans for our agricultural producers.

This bill would eliminate the restrictions on about \$470 million worth of guaranteed loans under the Consolidated Farm and Rural Development Act for qualified beginning farmers and ranchers. This is a much-needed piece of legislation that would provide for stopgap funding for many States that have exhausted their available allocations of guaranteed loan funds, including my own State of Nebraska.

It is important to stress that this money that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has not been used. The beginning farmer targets would be lifted on April 1. It would not be possible for the Department to use the "fenced" \$470 million by April 1.

Of particular concern as we prepare for spring planting in the Midwest is the ability of producers to show an adequate cash flow as they meet with their lenders. This legislation would make valuable use of this money now as farmers are preparing for their spring planting.

Mr. Speaker, there is no question that we have producers in rural areas that are struggling with low market prices and adverse weather conditions. With current market prices, some farmers are being faced with the added difficulty of obtaining operating loans.

Freeing up the beginning farmer guaranteed loan money that has not been used will be of great benefit to our producers. Nullifying any reservation of funds will potentially benefit a producer who otherwise would not have had a loan funding available.

As the gentleman from Texas (Chairman COMBEST) has indicated, I would also stress to my colleagues that there is still a need for what the President has requested in the supplemental. This legislation is not meant to replace the supplemental, but it will get our producers through perhaps the next 30, 45 days or so.

If a beginning farmer needs money, they probably have gotten it by now, as it has been available since late October. However, for those still in the USDA bureaucratic pipeline, this legislation says that beginning farmers will have priority under the supplemental.

Mr. Speaker, Congress has been doing its part to help our beleaguered producers; and this legislation is yet another effort to ensure that our farmers and ranchers will have adequate capital this spring. I urge the passage of H.R. 882.

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I yield such time as he may consume to the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. ETHERIDGE).

Mr. ETHERIDGE. Mr. Speaker, I thank the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM) for yielding me this time.

I want to take this opportunity this afternoon to thank the gentleman from Texas (Chairman COMBEST) and the gentleman from Texas (Mr. STENHOLM), the ranking member, for their hard work in bringing this important piece of legislation to the floor this afternoon in such a quick manner.

I am proud to be a cosponsor on this legislation, and I am glad that we are passing a bill that will help farmers through some of the most difficult times that they will face in decades.

Mr. Speaker, for more than a year now, farmers have been excluded from the robust economy that the rest of this country has enjoyed. While many citizens debate whether or not to roll over their IRAs, farmers are just trying to figure out how they can survive and put food on the table until this crisis has been turned around.

We have to take action to make sure that they survive and they have an opportunity to prosper. If we do not, consumers will want to know why the grocery store shelves are empty and food prices are so high, while farmers are left to pick up the pieces. We have to act now.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday, Secretary Glickman came to a farm breakfast in my district. More than 300 farmers showed up for breakfast. That is twice

the number that normally come in any given year. From the comments of what those folks said at that breakfast, they are hurting and hurting badly.

□ 1345

These loans will determine whether or not some of those farmers and their families and their neighbors can stay on the farm. I am glad we are taking action to help farmers make it through the dire straits that they now face and that we will act today.

Our small farmers are a vital part of our economic fiber in this country. They are important to the character of rural North Carolina and America, and we cannot afford for those small farmers to cease to exist.

I am proud of what we are doing this afternoon, and I want to make sure that this important program is available to farmers as they approach the critical spring planning season.

This is the first, as you have already heard, in many steps, including crop insurance reform and supplemental funding for this year as we look at the 1999 year that this Congress must take to strengthen the safety net for our farmers.

I urge unanimous passage of H.R. 882, and I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Committee on Agriculture and others in this Congress to make sure that we provide a safe and secure future for American farmers so the rest of us might enjoy a safe and secure future and good food.

Mr. STENHOLM. Mr. Speaker, I have no further requests for time, and I yield back the balance of my time.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, I would like to thank the gentleman from North Carolina (Mr. ETHERIDGE) for pointing out the fact that, while so many people in this country think the economy is doing so well, it is obvious those who say that have not been in the farm communities recently. There are some very, very difficult times ongoing there.

Mr. SMITH of Michigan. Mr. Speaker, I rise in support of H.R. 882. Natural disasters and low commodity prices have forced many farmers and ranchers to seek government loans to cover operating and ownership expenses. In fact, in many states, funds available for these USDA programs have already been exhausted, creating a credit crunch at a time when these loans are absolutely necessary to cover producers expenses.

H.R. 882 will immediately make available to the Secretary of Agriculture \$450 to \$500 million in unused funds in order to guarantee loans to farmers and ranchers. These unused funds are currently set aside for the Beginning Farmers and Ranchers program but were not to be available until April 1. Because it is not anticipated that these funds will ever be used by this program it makes sense to have them available for those most in need.

This bill requires no new net government outlays and will have no effect on the federal budget. It is a common-sense reaction to the problems facing rural America today and it deserves our full support.

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. The question is on the motion offered by the gentleman from Texas (Mr. COMBEST) that the House suspend the rules and pass the bill, H.R. 882.

The question was taken; and (two-thirds having voted in favor thereof) the rules were suspended and the bill was passed.

A motion to reconsider was laid on the table.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. COMBEST. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on H.R. 882, the bill just passed.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Texas?

There was no objection.

SOCIAL SECURITY GUARANTEE INITIATIVE

Mr. SHAW. Mr. Speaker, I move to suspend the rules and pass the joint resolution (H.J. Res. 32) expressing the sense of the Congress that the President and the Congress should join in undertaking the Social Security Guarantee Initiative to strengthen and protect the retirement income security of all Americans through the creation of a fair and modern Social Security Program for the 21st Century, as amended.

The Clerk read as follows:

H.J. RES. 32

Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled,

SECTION 1. SHORT TITLE.

This joint resolution may be cited as the "Social Security Guarantee Initiative".

SEC. 2. FINDINGS.

The Congress finds that—

(1) the Social Security program provides benefits to 44,000,000 Americans, including more than 27,000,000 retirees, 5,000,000 people with disabilities, and 2,000,000 surviving children, and is essential to the dignity and security of the Nation's elderly, disabled, and their families;

(2) the Social Security program's progressive benefit structure is of particular importance to women, due to their (A) longer life expectancies than men, making the Social Security program's lifetime, inflation-adjusted benefits a critical income support especially for widows; (B) lower average earnings; and (C) lower pension and other retirement savings, stemming in part from their lower incomes and their spending an average of 11 years out of the paid workforce caring for families;

(3) the approaching retirement of the Baby Boom Generation will result in the Social Security program's benefit costs exceeding its tax revenues beginning in 2013;

(4) the Social Security program faces looming insolvency and instability in the next century so that by 2032 the Social Security Trust Funds will be fully depleted and the program will be able to honor less than 75 percent of benefit commitments; and

(5) prompt action is necessary to restore Americans' confidence that their retirement benefits will be protected.

SEC. 3. SENSE OF THE CONGRESS.

The President and the Congress should join in strengthening the Social Security program and

protecting the retirement income security of all Americans for the 21st century in a manner that—

(1) ensures equal treatment across generations to all Americans, especially minorities and other low-income workers;

(2) recognizes the unique obstacles that women face in ensuring retirement, disability, and survivor security and the essential role that the Social Security program plays in protecting financial stability for women;

(3) provides a continuous benefit safety net for workers, their survivors, their dependents, and individuals with disabilities;

(4) protects guaranteed lifetime benefits, including cost-of-living adjustments that fully index for inflation, for current and future retirees; and

(5) does not increase taxes.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Pursuant to the rule, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. SHAW) and the gentleman from New York (Mr. RANGEL) each will control 20 minutes.

The Chair recognizes the gentleman from Florida (Mr. SHAW).

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. SHAW. Mr. Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members may have 5 legislative days within which to revise and extend their remarks on H.J. Res. 32.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Florida?

There was no objection.

Mr. SHAW. Mr. Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Mr. Speaker, our work on Social Security is well under way. We have held numerous Social Security hearing already this year, and the President has provided us with a framework for the Congress to consider as we work towards a bipartisan solution to Social Security's problems.

In fact, we are in agreement with President Clinton on many of the major issues relating to preserving and strengthening our Social Security system; namely, one, action is necessary now to shore up Social Security's financial underpinnings; two, 62 percent of the Federal budget surplus should be set aside until Social Security is indeed saved; three, investment in markets can be a part of the long-term solution for Social Security; and, four, personal savings accounts are both technically feasible and a necessary part of the solution.

Passage of H.J. Res. 32 will add to this strong start and will further strengthen our bipartisanship as we face the challenges ahead. The joint resolution says that Congress and the President should protect benefits for current and future retirees while avoiding any tax increases.

On a program as vital to our country as Social Security, I am sure all of my colleagues will agree that we must work together, and H.J. Res. 32 is a measure that deserves all of our support. I hope they will join with me in showing the American people that Congress is committed to strengthening and preserving Social Security for the future and for future generations.

Let me also add that I view this resolution as a test of whether the two parties can work together. We certainly