

I know it has been suggested that our system is untried. That is not true. We benefit from a system that is comparable to what we have designed in the tripartisan proposal, and it offers the maximum choices to our seniors. We think it is important to create as a permanent part of the Medicare Program.

To provide for any limitation of that type is doing a disservice to our seniors. It is giving them a false hope to say that your benefit expires in 7 years, unless, of course, future Congresses decide to make a change. So we are predicating their future, their health care, on whether or not a future Congress might decide to extend that program. I really don't think that is the type of precedent we want to take. We have never created a temporary benefit under the Medicare Program—never. We have never created a temporary benefit, and we should not start now.

I know there has been some question about the assets test included in the tripartisan proposal. First of all, this assets test was not something that was newly created. It is included in the Medicaid Program. Yes, this assets test is used for some Medicare beneficiaries, the dual eligibles, the qualified Medicare beneficiaries, QMBs, and specified low-income Medicare beneficiaries. So an assets test was included in our legislation that is the equivalent of the assets test in the Medicaid Program that was supported by this Senate back in 1987 and 1986 with overwhelming support. So this is not unprecedented. It is not unusual. It includes the same type of waivers that are included in the current Medicaid Program.

I welcome the debate that has developed between the two competing proposals regarding prescription drugs. It is my sincere hope that we will have the ability to work through our differences beyond the threshold of tomorrow, the 60 votes. I hope, again, that this system and this process are not designed for failure, that neither side gets the 60 votes and, therefore, we move on to other issues and we defer this to another year. It has happened far too often.

This benefit is long overdue for our Nation's seniors. We negotiated this compromise in good faith, in the hopes that we could have worked through with our colleague from Florida, who I know has worked very hard, who is very genuine in his interest in developing a prescription drug benefit for Medicare beneficiaries—I would have hoped we could have worked through the process in committee, but that was not to be. So we are at a point now of whether we can reconcile our differences to move beyond the 60 votes and be able to work through the various amendments and reach a conclusion.

The seniors of this country deserve that. I honestly don't understand why we can't at this point in time agree to pass a prescription drug benefit pro-

gram for Medicare beneficiaries. Our compromise wasn't designed to be an all or nothing or lines drawn in the sand. It was really an attempt in good faith, in the spirit of consensus building and compromise, because you can't do it without the other side of the aisle; there is no way you can possibly do it. That is why we started more than a year ago to develop this tripartisan proposal with the hope that we could have made this a reality for our Nation's seniors.

I urge my colleagues to give very serious consideration to what we have provided in this particular proposal for our seniors. Hopefully, we can come together and pass this legislation that is such an urgent need for the more than 44 million Medicare beneficiaries.

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

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

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period for morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for a period not to exceed 10 minutes each.

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

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

THE KETCHIKAN VENEER PLANT

• Mr. MURKOWSKI. Mr. President, today I offer my congratulations and state my full support for the actions taken this week by the Ketchikan Gateway Borough in acquiring the idle veneer plant at Ward Cove. At a time when the regional economy is reeling from a long series of blows that go back to 1993 when the first pulp mill closed, the Ketchikan Borough showed exceptional leadership by stepping to the plate to retain this vital manufacturing facility in the community.

The importance of encouraging an increase in healthy wood products manufacturing facilities in Southeast Alaska cannot be overemphasized. Such plants are vital necessities for Southeast Alaska to have good, year-round, family wage jobs providing the economic backbone to its communities. Proof of this is readily seen in the current jobs picture. As a consequence of the Clinton Administration's actions, Alaska's 2 pulp mills and several sawmills were forced to cease operation, costing the region more than 3,500 direct timber jobs in the last 10 years. Add to that the loss of countless indirect jobs and you have a formula for economic disaster.

With Ketchikan's action, we now enter a new era. Its leadership will help Southeast Alaska embark on a much-needed recovery phase in which real jobs for real people can bring new life back to litigation-weary communities. I congratulate Ketchikan and pledge to help in any way I can.

A critical component of making the veneer plant a viable operation will be economic timber supply. A spate of lawsuits by environmental groups has artificially driven down the supply of timber and has even stopped timber sale planning on the Tongass. As quickly as possible, the Borough needs to conclude an agreement with a company to operate the veneer mill and together we must address the supply issue with the U.S. Forest Service.

To that end, I am calling today for the Alaska Regional Forester, Denny Bschor, to meet in a timely manner with Borough officials to reach an agreement to ensure a stable and sufficient supply of economic timber to enable the veneer plant and the sawmills of Southeast Alaska to succeed. The new Bush Administration owes Ketchikan a commitment to bargain in good faith to help the community succeed in rejuvenating its economy.

The Regional Forester has the statutory authority to offer timber under 10 year contracts, and I urge the Forest Service to conclude agreements using that authority. Furthermore, I call on all Alaskans to join me in supporting a 10 year sale for Ketchikan in recognition of the community's substantial leadership in restoring the regional economy.

The biggest impediment to making timber available is the plethora of lawsuits that have been systematically leveled against the agency. Those lawsuits, if not resolved soon, will result in more mill closures and further unemployment. The recent court injunctions on timber sales that have already passed environmental review highlight the need for longer term agreements.

The Tongass National Forest is fully capable of supporting the level of harvest needed to supply the region's mills without affecting the other legitimate uses of the forest. Less than 400,000 acres, only 2.4 percent of the Tongass, have been harvested since industrial harvest began in the 1950s. Moreover, each year about 800 million board feet of timber is lost to natural tree mortality on the Tongass. That is nearly 4 times the maximum annual harvest under the current management plan and 16 times the amount cut last year.

Under the Tongass plan, an average of less than one-half of 1 percent of the Tongass can be harvested in any given year. If offered in economic packages, that small part of the available resource can be sufficient for the needs of the existing industry. There is simply no reason the Forest Service should not make sufficient economic volume available to run a veneer mill and provide logs to the sawmills of South East Alaska. This action is essential to the