

nations, and I thank AmCham Russia for your leadership and commitment to that future.

EARTH DAY

Mr. CARDIN. Madam President, I commemorate April 22—Earth Day 2007, a day set aside to celebrate gains we have made in improving the environment and to renew our commitment to protect our planet.

Earth Day was established by Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin and was first celebrated in 1970. Senator Nelson firmly believed that education was the key to changing people's attitude about the environment. Since then, the Earth Day celebration has spread throughout the nation and to the rest of the world, with more and more people getting involved in efforts to clean and nurture the environment.

Despite Earth Day's popularity and the many programs that were created to improve the health of the planet, our world is still wrought with environmental problems. We still face many pressing issues such as global warming, protecting our coastal waters from over-fishing, and preserving America's most precious resource lands from the Alaskan Tongass Rainforest to the Redrock lands in Utah, to our own Chesapeake Bay.

Today, we face a serious and growing threat from global warming. Recently I told the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee about the immediate threats that global warming poses to Maryland. A significant part of Maryland is in low-lying areas that would be inundated if global temperatures keep rising. The National Flood Insurance Program has designated more than 12 percent of Maryland as a special flood hazard area, and an estimated 68,000 Maryland homes and buildings are located within a flood plain.

We are already seeing the effects. About a third of Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge on the Eastern Shore has been lost to sea level rise in the past 70 years. Smith Island, situated in the Chesapeake Bay, has lost 30 percent of its land to rising sea levels since 1850.

I have long supported a comprehensive, environmentally friendly energy policy that emphasizes increasing the availability and use of renewable energy, as well as promoting greater energy efficiency. Energy efficiency and renewable energy will reduce America's dangerous dependency on foreign oil while also dramatically reducing greenhouse gases.

Closer to home, we must continue to focus our efforts on restoring the Chesapeake Bay. The Bush administration's budget proposes drastic cuts to vital initiatives, including environmental education, funds to upgrade wastewater treatment plants, and several farm bill conservation programs that help farmers reduce nutrient runoff from entering the Bay. The budget

resolution that I helped draft and the Senate passed last month restores many of those dangerous cuts, but we still have much work ahead of us to assure that these critical Federal programs are fully funded.

Earth Day celebrations serve as important reminders that we cannot take our natural resources for granted. I urge all Americans to join together to protect, preserve, and restore the planet's natural treasures.

RURAL VETERANS HEALTH CARE IMPROVEMENT ACT

Ms. SNOWE. Madam President, I am a proud cosponsor of the Rural Veterans Health Care Improvement Act. Increasing access to veterans' health care facilities is essential to recognizing the realities that exist on the ground today, not only for veterans living in rural areas of my home State of Maine, but for the millions of veterans living in remote areas across our broad land. I applaud Senator SALAZAR for introducing this legislation at a time when so many of our veterans receive their health care through the VA and nearly half of today's active duty military servicemembers and tomorrow's veteran population list rural communities as their homes of record. Once again, I commend Senator SALAZAR for his continuing resoluteness and advocacy for our veterans.

Our legislation will work to expand upon the Veterans Benefits, Health Care, and Information Technology Act of 2006, which passed the Senate with my support at the end of the 109th Congress. Under that legislation, the Veterans Affairs Office of Rural Health was created in order to enhance access to VA medical facilities for veterans living in geographically remote areas.

First off, our newly proposed legislation tasks the Office of Rural Health with developing demonstration projects that would broaden the access to health care in rural areas by way of partnership between the Department of Veterans Affairs, Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the Department of Health and Human Services at access hospitals and community health centers. Second, this bill calls on the Office of Rural Health to establish between one and five Centers for Excellence to be based at VA medical centers to research ways to improve health care for rural veterans.

While increased outpatient care services in Maine and other underserved areas is a good step forward, it is only half of the equation. Veterans must also be able to get to the facilities, and while programs such as the Disabled American Veterans Transportation Network are to be commended, they simply cannot take care of all the transportation needs of all the patients who require VA health care.

Therefore, our legislation would task the Director of the Office of Rural Health to create a program that would provide grants of up to \$50,000 to vet-

erans' service organizations and State veterans' service officers to assist veterans with innovative travel options to VA medical centers. Additionally, this legislation directly addresses the inequitable travel reimbursements currently provided to veterans for their travel expenses to VA medical facilities, an issue which I have brought up to the VA Secretary Jim Nicholson in the past. Under current law, veterans with a disability of 30 percent or more are entitled to 11 cents per mile, a rate that has not changed since 1977. In order to put an end to this unjust practice, our legislation would provide critical assistance to veterans traveling long distances to VA health care facilities by reimbursing them at the Federal rate of 48.5 cents per mile.

Establishing new facilities and transportation networks in Maine, as enumerated within the provisions of our legislation, would give rural veterans better access to the veteran health care system and deliver on the promise America has made to our men and women in uniform. But as rural veterans will tell you, there is a long way to go, and we must redouble our efforts to ensure that the VA secures the necessary resources for all rural regions across Maine and throughout the Nation.

Furthermore, I have nothing but the utmost respect for those brave Americans who served in uniform with honor, courage, and distinction. The obligation our Nation holds for its veterans is enormous, and it is an obligation that must be fulfilled every day, by invoking the indelible words of President John F. Kennedy, who stated:

As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.

Undoubtedly, these words still speak truth today, at a time when over 600,000 courageous men and women have returned from combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan. It is now up to Congress to do everything in its power to answer our veterans' call, to ensure that they receive the benefits that they rightly earned and rightly deserve. I strongly urge my colleagues to support this legislation. Our veterans deserve nothing less.

Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

ADDITIONAL STATEMENTS

CONGRATULATING THE SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY WOMEN'S BASKETBALL TEAM

• Mr. THUNE. Madam President, today I honor the South Dakota State University women's basketball team. In only their third season as Division I competitors, the Jackrabbits made it to the quarterfinals of the Women's