the root of our larger fiscal problems. Unless we act now, these programs will no longer be sustainable, and spending and debt will continue to spiral out of control.

The good news is that a solution actually exists. As I have said many times before, the best way to address this crisis is the Conrad-Gregg proposal, which would provide an expedited pathway for fixing the long-term challenges of entitlement spending and our unprecedented national debt—challenges that the Democratic budget and their economic policies of the past few months completely ignore.

There has never been a better time to adopt this sensible bipartisan proposal. This week we learned that the deficit for the current fiscal year will be nearly $90 billion higher than previously estimated—bringing the deficit for this year to $1.8 trillion. This is nearly four times—four times—higher than the record set last year. It also means that this year's deficit is higher than those of the past 5 years combined.

The danger of all this debt is simple: higher inflation that threatens to derail an economic recovery, and trillions in debt that our children and grandchildren will have to repay to countries such as China and nations in the Middle East.

Secretary Geithner said yesterday that when it comes to reforming Social Security, the administration will build a bipartisan consensus to ensure Social Security remains solvent. I welcome the statement, and I urge the administration to support the Conrad-Gregg proposal which is the best way and, I would argue, the only way to address entitlement spending and our unprecedented national debt. After yesterday's report, it is clear we cannot wait any longer to address this crisis.

Americans have relied on programs such as Medicare and Social Security for decades. It would be dishonest and unfair not to tell them the truth about these programs—that they are near collapse and that urgent reform is needed to bring them back to sustainability. More than 800,000 Kentuckians receive Social Security benefits, and nearly that many are enrolled in Medicare. They deserve our honesty. And they deserve action from lawmakers on both sides of the aisle. We need to make sure programs such as Social Security and Medicare remain viable for them and for their children and their grandchildren.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

RESERVATION OF LEADER TIME

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the leadership time is reserved.

EXECUTIVE SESSION

NOMINATION OF DAVID J. HAYES TO BE DEPUTY SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to executive session to consider the following nomination, which the clerk will report.

The assistant legislative clerk read the nomination of David J. Hayes, of Virginia, to be Deputy Secretary of the Interior.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Under the previous order, there will now be 1 hour of debate equally divided and controlled between the two leaders of their designees.

The Senator from Utah.

Mr. BENNETT. Mr. President, I rise in opposition to the Hayes nomination. I am here with the Senator from Alaska, and I wish to be told after I have consumed 15 minutes so the Senator from Alaska and I can coordinate our presentations.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Chair will do so.

Mr. BENNETT. Mr. President, I listened with interest to the statement of the majority leader with respect to David Hayes, and I agree with much of what he had to say. I feel compelled to correct some of the things he had to say because they are some of the same things the Department of the Interior has been saying that I find are, in fact, not factual.

I agree with him that the President should be entitled to appoint whomever it is he wants. And I agree with him that David Hayes is qualified for this position. I also believe, however, that Members of this body, who have the responsibility of the confirmation vote, are entitled to clear answers to their questions before the confirmation should proceed.

It is my opinion we have been asking for clear answers to those questions—to legitimate questions—and those answers have not been forthcoming. Therefore, I am not willing to proceed with the confirmation vote until we get those answers.

This is not to say I am opposed to David Hayes and will do everything to see to it he is not confirmed. Indeed, I want to do everything I can to see that he is confirmed as rapidly as possible. But ''as rapidly as possible'' does not mean I must give up my rights to receive clear answers to legitimate questions.

Let me go to some of the items the majority leader covered in his statement because they are the same items the Secretary of the Interior has used, and that others have used in press releases, that I believe need to be set straight. They are simply not factually true.

Let's start with the question of leases. Numbers. How many leases were put up and sold by the BLM in the last month of the Bush administration in the State of Utah? The answer to that question is 128. Not 77; 128. All of those 128 leases were subject to exactly the same kind of procedure. All of them went through the same kind of review. All of them were handled by the same team of experts: career people within the Department. And all of them ultimately were sold.

The majority leader said this happened in the midnight hours of the Bush administration, as if this whole thing were cobbled together in the last minute. In fact, much of the activity dealing with the sale of these leases occurred over a 7-year period. Why? Because all of the parties involved wanted to make sure they complied with all of the rules. If it had been handled in a ''rush it through,'' ''get it done during our political circumstance'' sort of manner, they could have been granted in 2004 or 2007; it did not have to wait until the last months of 2008. The reason it waited until the last months of 2008 was because the plans were so meticulously reviewed to make sure they complied with every rule that it took that long. So let's get rid of the idea that this was a political decision on the part of the Bush administration. The record is very clear it was not.

All right. After the Obama administration took over, out of the 128 leases that were granted, suddenly 77 were withdrawn by the Secretary of the Interior. Why? If there was a flaw in the way these leases were handled, the entire 128 should have been withdrawn because they were all handled in exactly the same manner. The 77 were withdrawn because an environmental group filed a lawsuit. The environmental group decided which leases should be challenged, not the Department of the Interior. It was not a review by any career officer in the Department of the Interior that said these leases were flawed. It was a political decision by an environmental group that said we are going to file a lawsuit; and in response to that lawsuit, the Secretary of the Interior said: I am going to pull these 77 leases, and then gave the same justification for his actions that the majority leader has given here on the floor today; that is, they are right next door to the national parks and no one wants an oil rig next to a national park.

No. 1, most of the leases are natural gas; there are not oil rigs involved at all. And, No. 2, they are not right next door to the national parks. Some of them are as far as 60 miles away.

Let's look at a map I have in the Chamber and see where these leases are. On this map, shown in yellow are the national parks. This one is Arches National Park, and this one is Canyonlands National Park. Shown in green is existing oil and gas leases that were in place long before the December lease sale. Shown in red are the leases that were granted in the so-called midnight hours of the Bush administration.

A quick glance at the map makes it very clear that the challenged leases