that they count on if Congress does not act by the end of this year, in a few short weeks. These workers are not looking for a handout. They do not want to be a burden, but they need support while they get back on their feet and back on the job.

In this struggling economy, maintaining these unemployment benefits is critical. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office has said maintaining unemployment benefits is one of the most effective policy tools we have now to boost the economy and get money into the pocket of our consumers. If they are cut off, it would not just be devastating for the families who count on this support, it is going to hurt our small businesses and communities to have billions of dollars pulled away from consumers who spend it every month on food and rent and clothing. We cannot afford to have this lifeline cut off. Our great country has always been a place that stands with our middle-class families when times are tough and gives them the support they need to get back on their feet and back on the job and contributing to their communities once again.

I urge all of our colleagues to stand with us as the holidays approach, to maintain these unemployment insurance benefits that so many of our families are counting on, and to keep working to cut taxes for the middle class and get our economy moving again and put our country back to work.

On that last point, before I finish, I want to join our majority leader and so many others who today called on Republicans to stop blocking their own bill and allow it to be brought up for an up-or-down vote. We know the Republican bill that passed the House yesterday is going to fail. It is bad policy, and many in their own caucus apparently do not support it. Their bill takes some of the policies we are fighting for to support the middle class, including unemployment benefits, waters them down, and then adds a whole bunch of tea party red meat to attract the Republican support it needed to pass the House.

I am focused on delivering the tax cuts that middle-class families need and deserve, so I will vote against the Republican bill if it is allowed to come up. But I cannot believe that our Republican colleagues are now preventing us from taking a vote on their own bill and then not allowing us to come together, which we need to do in these last few days before the holidays, to get a bipartisan deal and get it to the American people. They expect us to do this job. That is what is holding us up.

I urge our colleagues to sit down, work out an agreement, so that we can all celebrate the holidays with our families, and the families out there who are counting on us will know we have done the job for them.

I yield the floor and I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The bill 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 (Mrs. HAGAN). Without objection, it is so ordered.

THE KEYSTONE XL PIPELINE

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, I think there are a few things that many people across the country, and, hopefully, in the Congress, agree upon. One is that we need to focus like a laser on creating jobs. That is something I think there is universal agreement on here.

I also think there is universal agreement that we ought to become more energy independent as a nation. We need to look for ways in which our country can lessen that dangerous dependence we have on foreign sources of energy. We import a good amount of our oil from other places around the world—some of them not so friendly regimes. That is why it is such a mystery as to why the Keystone XL Pipeline project is running into such resistance from the administration.

It is ironic in many respects because we had the President of the United States, several months ago, saying:

> We are going to have to import some oil; and when it comes to the oil we import from other nations, obviously, we've got to look at neighbors like Canada and Mexico that are stable, steady, and reliable sources.

That is what the President said earlier this year, that if we are going to get energy, if we are going to import oil, we ought to import it from countries that are friendly to the United States. I argue there is no country more friendly to the United States than Canada, with whom we have a very robust trading relationship. We do about $640 billion of bilateral trade annually with our Canadian neighbors. So thinking that we might be able to get oil from Canada, as opposed to from Venezuela or somewhere in the Middle East, seems like a good option for this country—a good option that policymakers here ought to be very supportive of.

That, again, makes it an even greater mystery as to why the administration has insisted on blocking or even making a decision about whether we can develop a project called the Keystone XL Pipeline, which would take advantage of those oil resources available in Canada and bring them into the United States, transport them through a pipeline that is 1,700 miles long to refineries where that product can be refined, and people here could benefit from it or it could be sold perhaps somewhere else. Nevertheless, it would benefit the economy.

Both in the initial stages when the project is under construction, as well as later on, it will create lots of jobs. In my State of South Dakota—the pipeline would come through South Dakota as it makes its way down to the refineries, and we would benefit from hundreds of jobs that would be created and $½ billion in economic activity will be created alone in South Dakota. That is during the construction phase, not to mention all the State and local tax revenue that would benefit many of the local governments across my State and other States through which the pipeline would traverse.

It is increasingly a mystery—I don't know how else to describe it—a curiosity or something—to those of us who see the great benefit in getting our oil resources from a friendly country like Canada as to why this administration would be so opposed even to issuing a decision on permitting this pipeline project that would enable that oil to come from Canada through to refineries in this country.

The other issue on which there is universal agreement is that we ought to put policies in place that create jobs. There is no greater shovel-ready project than the Keystone XL Pipeline. It would have an immediate impact of 20,000 jobs that will be created immediately—a $7 billion initial investment and billions more over the years as this project continues to be utilized. Furthermore, I argue that it will create other opportunities for energy project development. Certainly, the Bakken oil find in North Dakota would stand to benefit from having a pipeline this accessible to it. It creates all kinds of spinoffs and other types of economic activity that would be good for jobs.

We will have something that lessens our dependence upon foreign sources of energy by about 700,000 barrels of oil a day, creates hundreds of thousands of jobs, and enhances the ability of State and local governments to collect revenues, which they desperately need for their own purposes and needs. Yet here we are looking at this project—or at least a decision on it—being blocked by this administration for no apparent reason other than politics, I argue.

We are heading into a political year, and the President is running for reelection next year. I think it is clear that the delay on a decision on this project for 18 months was clearly designed to get past the Presidential election so the President would not have to make a decision that splits his political base. We have the labor groups that are for it and the environmental groups that are opposed to it. I guess it must be a political decision for this administration to delay this project. It doesn't make sense for America and American workers.

The President says he gets up every day and he thinks about what he can do to create jobs. Well, here are 20,000 immediate jobs that we can benefit from right away—not to mention the many jobs that would come if this project was built.

As we look at the legislation sent to us from the House of Representatives, it includes this Keystone XL Pipeline language that would allow a decision

to be made 60 days from its enactment. So we could accelerate at least the period in which this decision could be made.

Why is that important? Because this project is going to go on one way or the other. If it is not built in this country, it will be shipped somewhere else around the world—perhaps China or another country—and the American workers and the American economy will suffer, and the American need that we have for energy will not be met. We are not going to benefit or be advantaged by not having this project here or if it goes someplace else. That makes absolutely no sense for our economy, no sense for jobs and for many States that are in support of this project.

I hope as this debate gets underway on the proposal sent from the House of Representatives, the sticking point, the thing that hangs it up is not the Keystone XL Pipeline. People will probably have honest disagreements about various provisions in the legislation being sent to us from the House, but one thing that should not delay or in any way detour this from being considered in the Senate is resistance or objections to a final decision being made on the Keystone XL Pipeline.

I want to read a few things for you that have been said by some of the folks across this country who think this is a good idea. Many represent working people—the labor unions. The Teamsters said:

> The Keystone Pipeline project will offer working men and women a real chance to earn a good wage and support their families in this difficult economic climate.

The AFL–CIO said:

> For America's skilled craft construction professionals, any discussion of the Keystone XL project begins and ends with one word: Jobs.

Look at what has been said by the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers:

> At a time when jobs are the top global priority, the Keystone project will put thousands back to work and have ripple benefits throughout the North American economy. Our members look forward to being part of this historic project and pledge to deliver the highest quality work to make it a success.

That is what some of the labor leaders are saying. I want to read what some key Democrats in Congress have said about this. These are a few excerpts from Democratic Members of Congress:

> America truly cannot afford to say ''no'' to this privately funded, $20 billion jobs-creating infrastructure project, which could bolster our economic, energy, and national security. To that end, we respectfully urge you to ensure that the Presidential permit is issued for Keystone XL.

Here is another quote:

> Mr. President, America needs the Keystone XL pipeline. It is in our national interest to have a permit issued for Keystone XL as soon as possible.

The Department of State's final environmental impact statement reaffirmed the findings of the two previous environmental impact statements; namely, that the pipeline will have no significant impact on the environment.

So we have a project that has been OK'ed by the environmental agencies in this country, the people who look at the environmental impacts, who have said this project is ready to go. We have labor organizations that are waiting and are saying this is important to getting people back to work. We have Democrats in Congress who have said this is a project that we should be for. In fact, there was a vote on this language in a freestanding bill in the House recently. There were 47 Democrats who came out in support of the Keystone XL Pipeline legislation. So we have 47 Democrats on record.

Mr. CONRAD. Madam President, I have some sympathy for the position I hear the Senator enunciating—that the issue of the pipeline ought not to be the thing that prevents us from moving forward. I personally think the pipeline is absolutely in the national interest. It will help us reduce our dependence on foreign energy—at least foreign sources that are hostile to our interests.

The big question is—at least for this Senator—would the language permit a rerouting of the line within the State of Nebraska so that the question of the Ogallala aquifer would not be addressed? Is it the Senator's understanding that the language that has come to us from the House would permit Nebraska to reroute the line to avoid the aquifer?

Mr. THUNE. Madam President, through the Chair, I would say to my colleague from North Dakota that my understanding is the legislation does permit that to happen, and that is why I believe the State of Nebraska, including the Governor and our colleagues here in the Senate from Nebraska, have now come out in support of this. Whereas previously there had been some concern about the Ogallala aquifer, my understanding is the legislation allows for that issue to be addressed. And I have a statement here from the Governor of Nebraska expressing his support for this legislation. So it does strike me that at least that should not be an issue that in any way deters consideration of this pipeline and that we shouldn't have to wait 18 months.

I am saying to my colleague from North Dakota—and I think he recognizes the value of this, as he is from North Dakota, and obviously his is a State that could be favorably impacted by the economic activity resulting from this pipeline—that if we don't do this, somebody else is going to benefit from it. This is not going to wait around. There are vast oil sands reserves up in Canada, and they are looking for a place where they can get this to a refinery and get it refined. If the United States doesn't move forward, some other country is going to benefit.

Mr. CONRAD. If I could just say to my colleague, Canada is going to develop this resource. This oil is going to go somewhere. It is absolutely in our national interest for that oil to come to our country. If the language is, as the Senator represents, that it permits the rerouting of the line within Nebraska to avoid the issue with the Ogallala aquifer, then I, for one, on this side, would hope this could be part of the final package.

I hope this is something we can work through in the coming hours. This should not be the thing that prevents us from reaching across the aisle, reaching across the divide between the two Chambers and achieving a result that is critically important for the country.

I thank the Senator for allowing me to ask this question.

Mr. THUNE. I appreciate the question and comments of the Senator from North Dakota. I couldn't agree more with the sentiments he expressed.

I do believe we have in front of us something for which there is a lot of bipartisan support—an extension of unemployment insurance benefits, with some reforms, a payroll tax cut extension, a fix for the physician reimbursements under Medicare, and a number of other things that have been put into this with an eye toward not only addressing what are some very serious concerns—many of these things expire at the end of the year—but also something that would really create jobs, that has a jobs component to it that would do something positive for our economy.

I hope that we can find a way to come together and that this does not become a deterrent to the legislation that is going to be before us in the not too distant future—the proposal that came to us from the House of Representatives. I certainly hope that doesn't unravel as a result of the Keystone XL Pipeline language being included because I recognize—as the Senator from North Dakota has expressed, and many of his colleagues on his side, along with many of my colleagues on our side—the value of what this could do for jobs, what this could do for our economy, and what this could do for America's energy needs. This will enable us to do business with a friendly partner to the north—Canada—as opposed to continuing to import oil from other countries around the world with which we do not have that kind of a friendly and stable relationship.

I would hope the President would make a decision not to get in the way or assert pressure on Members on his side to vote against this simply because it includes this particular provision. It is good for America, it is good for the States that are impacted, and many of the local governments would benefit. It is certainly good for jobs and the economy, as has been voiced by the various labor unions across this country that represent working Americans. With 700,000 barrels of oil coming to America from Canada, we would be creating economic activity and jobs versus 700,000 barrels of oil going someplace else around the world and some

other country benefitting and our becoming even more dependent on foreign sources of energy.

So, Madam President, again, I don't know what to say. This is a no-brainer, and so I hope the Senate will find its way before we adjourn for the Christmas holiday to enact this legislation that has been put forward that would enable this project to be decided. It doesn't prescribe one way or the other what the President does; it just says the President either has to approve it or give a reason why it is not in the national interest.

I see the other Senator from North Dakota, Mr. HOEVEN, is here as well. He has been a leader and involved in getting this legislation introduced. I thank both my colleagues for recognizing its importance, and I hope we can move legislation that will get this project decided one way or the other. In my view, an affirmative decision would be preferable and would allow us to move forward.

Madam President, with that, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from North Dakota.

ECONOMIC POLICY

Mr. CONRAD. Madam President, I wanted to come to the floor to discuss the question of extending the payroll tax cut, dealing with unemployment insurance, dealing with compensation for doctors who treat Medicare patients, and also addressing the question of the alternative minimum tax and, of course, the other tax extenders as well.

This is a key moment for the country. As I expressed earlier—as Senator THUNE was addressing the body—I personally do not believe the Keystone Pipeline should hold us back. This is something upon which I think we could get broad agreement, especially if the language is as the Senator has represented and as Senator HOEVEN has assured me—that it permits the State of Nebraska to reroute that line so that the Ogallala aquifer is not in danger. In my judgment, it is entirely in the national interest to get the Keystone Pipeline advanced. So that should not be the issue that hangs us up.

As we look at things that are holding back the economy, unemployment remains far too high, the housing crisis continues, and we have weak consumer confidence and demand. That really is at the heart of our ongoing economic weakness. Personal debt is still near record levels. We have tightened borrowing standards for businesses and consumers. I hear very often that even good businesses with good track records at paying back loans can't secure the credit they need to expand. And we have State and local budget cutbacks that are continuing.

As we look at the private sector jobs picture, there is some good news because we have now had many months of expansion of private sector payrolls. In fact, if we go back to 2010, in March of the year, ever since then we have seen private sector payrolls increasing to the tune of millions of jobs. So there is progress being made.

When we look at the reason there has been progress, I believe two of the most distinguished economists in the country gave us a background to understand why we are seeing this progress after one of the greatest financial debacles in our country's history. Alan Blinder, the former Deputy Chairman of the Federal Reserve, and Mark Zandi, who was an economic adviser to the McCain campaign, did an analysis of the Federal Government's response to the financial crisis and the recession. Here is what they found, and they are speaking of TARP and the stimulus:

> We find that its effects on real GDP, jobs, and inflation are huge, and probably averted what could have been called Great Depression 2.0. When all is said and done, the financial and fiscal policies will have cost taxpayers a substantial sum, but not nearly as much as most had feared, and not nearly as much as if policymakers had not acted at all. If the comprehensive policy responses saved the economy from another depression, as we estimate, they were well worth their cost.

Madam President, we have a debate going on in this country about economic policy, and our friends on the other side believe that they have the answer, that they have the prescription. I would just remind those who might be listening that it was their policy and their prescription that led this country to the brink of economic collapse. They controlled the economic policy of this country for 8 years, and they put in place a series of policies that they said would dramatically expand job opportunities in this country and strengthen the economy. But we know what happened.

At the end of 2008, I was in the meeting here in the Capitol with the Bush administration's Secretary of the Treasury and Chairman of the Federal Reserve. They told us they were taking over AIG, the big insurance company, the next morning, and they told us that if they did not, they believed there would be a financial collapse within days. Going back to the same tired, failed economic policies that put us in that position is a mistake—a profound mistake. Hopefully we would learn from history.

I believe what is needed now is for America to take steps to strengthen the economy in the short term but to combine that with fiscal discipline over the mid and longer term so that we can get back on track and face up to this debt threat.

Two of the more distinguished economists in the country, in addition to the two I have already cited, have just concluded work for the Peterson Institute for International Economics. These are the Reinharts—Dr. Carmen Reinhart and Dr. Vincent Reinhart—and this is what they concluded following severe financial crises. They found that economic recoveries are shallower and take much longer. Here is what they said in their analysis:

> Real per capita GDP growth rates are significantly lower during the decade following severe financial crises. In the 10-year window following severe financial crises, unemployment rates are significantly higher than in the decade that preceded the crisis. The decade of relative prosperity prior to the fall was importantly fueled by an expansion in credit and rising leverage that spans about 10 years; it is followed by a lengthy period of retrenchment that most often only begins after the crisis and lasts almost as long as the credit surge.

What they are reporting to us, after looking at a long period of economic history and dozens of countries, is that after a financial crisis, recovery takes much longer than is typical from a standard recession.

We now have a bill that was sent over from the House that I believe has serious defects. I believe that bill is a nonstarter.

First of all, the House leaders included extraneous provisions making it a partisan bill. President Obama has said he will veto it. Even the Senate GOP won't vote on it. So we have the curious circumstance where we have a bill sent to us by the House of Representatives, controlled by the Republican Party, and the Republican Party in the Senate won't permit a vote on the Republican bill. One might ask, why would that be? Perhaps the reason is they know there aren't many votes for it in this Chamber, just as there weren't many votes for it when it was previously offered on this side.

So more than just extending the payroll tax cut is at stake. We also need to extend unemployment insurance, and we need to fix the cut that is about to happen to doctors who treat Medicare patients. That is the so-called doc fix. We need a compromise, not just partisanship, from both sides. Both sides need to find a way to come together.

I have tried to indicate on this side a willingness to cross the partisan divide with respect to the Keystone Pipeline. Some on the other side have said that is important for their support for this legislation. I have said—at least speaking for me—that I am prepared to support the Keystone Pipeline because I do believe it is in the national interest.

As we look at the effect of allowing the expiring payroll tax cut to die, this is what Goldman Sachs said to us:

> Should [the payroll tax cut and extended unemployment benefits] expire at the end of the year, fiscal drag will be intense in 2012.

In other words, because there will be a reduction in demand in the economy, we will see lower economic growth, we will see lower job creation, we will even see a risk of returning to recession. This is from Goldman Sachs, the U.S. Economic Analyst, ''What Turns a Stall Into a Slump?'' They are telling us one way to turn a stall into a slump is to fail to extend the payroll tax cuts and to extend unemployment insurance benefits to those who have been out of work for extended periods of time.

That is not just the view of Goldman Sachs. I wrote a letter to the Congressional Budget Office—that is nonpartisan—and I asked them which of