Not later, now. If we don't take action soon, we won't have family farmers left. We won't have to worry about an emergency family farm bill because there won't be family farmers around to respond to.

Again, if there was an earthquake or a flood or fire or tornado or perhaps even some hog disease, as Will Rogers used to say, you'd have all the Federal agents coming out to talk about the hog disease. They would want to know, ''what is happening here and will it spread to other hogs?''

One way to get attention, it seems to me, is for Congress and the President to decide that this is a farm crisis. It is in my part of the country, with the collapse in prices and the natural disaster that has kept about 3 million acres from being planted in North Dakota because it was too wet. The floods and the worst crop disease in this century, all piled on top of family farmers' shoulders at a time when prices are collapsed. To add to their burden, we have a trade agreement that allows the Europeans to spend 10 times as much on their farm program as we do and undercuts prices on sales to foreign governments. We let them do that in excess of ours—we won't even use our export program for reasons I don't understand—at a time of mounting burdens on family farmers in a way that is fundamentally unfair.

We had better decide as a country that family farming matters to our future. If we don't, they won't be around. When they are not around, corporations will farm our country coast to coast. The price of food will go up and this country will have lost something and every small town will have lost something important.

This is not just about farmers. It is about small towns and Main Streets and boarded-up business and economies that are empty shells in a lot of our small communities.

My message is very simple: We have a responsibility this month. We have a responsibility now, all of us, and so does the President, to have a meeting. I want the White House to have a meeting on this with Republicans and Democrats. I want us to come together with an emergency package that responds to the farm crisis, does it boldly, does it in a way that helps real family farmers, and does it in a way that gives family farmers some hope that their future is a future in which they can make a decent living raising America's food supply.

If I might make one additional point: We have to rely on foreign markets as well. We produce more food than we consume in this country. Yet I heard last week that the amount of imported food in this country has doubled in the last 7 years.

We had protests at the Canadian border last weekend. It is unfair the level of imports coming from Canada. The thing I don't understand, however, is the grain market, all these folks that worship at the altar of the marketplace in the grain market. The grain market says to our farmers: Your food that you produce has no value. Yet all the testimony we hear from all around the world, Sudan included, tells us that old women are climbing trees foraging for leaves to eat because there is nothing to eat. We know that a substantial portion of the world's population goes to bed at night with an ache in their belly because of hunger.

It makes no sense for us to be told that our food has no value when people go to bed hungry each night. I want the White House and the Congress together to boldly respond to this issue in the coming weeks. This 4-week period is critical. We must put this on the agenda in a bipartisan way and do so boldly.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Montana is recognized.

THE AGRICULTURE CRISIS

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I commend the Senator from North Dakota for his statement. He is on target. He raises an issue that so far this Congress has not dealt with. It is as precipitous, as calamitous, as tragic, frankly, as the Senator indicated. I very much hope that Senators heard the statement of the Senator from North Dakota. I also hope the White House heard his statement, and others, too.

I do not know exactly what the answer is, but I do know we need an answer. We need a solution to the problems our farmers are facing because the conditions he described in North Dakota are the same conditions one would find in my State, particularly the eastern half, which produces a lot of grain and some barley. But it is a wheat-producing area that is experiencing very difficult conditions.

TEMPORARY TRADE RELIEF FOR THE U.S. LAMB INDUSTRY

Mr. BAUCUS. Mr. President, I want to acknowledge, and I very much appreciate, the action taken last week by the President in response to the recommendations of the International Trade Commission—otherwise known as the ITC—on relief for the American lamb industry. As you know, the industry has gone through very difficult times these last few years. Imports have surged dramatically and lamb prices have dropped precipitously. The package of trade relief and adjustment assistance announced by the President will help the industry adjust. It will allow our producers and feeders to keep their businesses and prosper in the future.

I am very grateful to the President and the staff of many agencies for their work on behalf of the American lamb industry and the American workers in that industry.

This was an important decision. Why? For several reasons. First, of course, it provides significant relief to the lamb industry, which is very important in my home State, as well as elsewhere in the Nation. Second, however, it demonstrates that section 201 of U.S. trade law can work. This is the so-called ''safeguard provision.'' It is designed to prevent serious disruption to the domestic industry whenever there is an import surge.

Third, the decision was important because I hope it shows a renewed commitment by the Clinton administration to assist American industries. This includes the agriculture sector that faces unprecedented challenges in the U.S. market for reasons not of their own making.

Section 201 has been little used in recent years. Both Democratic and Republican administrations have been reluctant to agressively apply its provisions. For example, in the mid-1980s President Reagan would not follow an ITC recommendation for trade relief for the American footwear industry.

That failure was a major contributor to the introduction of many legislative proposals that could have significantly closed the American market to foreign products. American industries and workers—whether in manufacturing, agriculture, or services—must think the Federal Government will use all available tools to help them when they are challenged suddenly by surges in imports. This is especially important today, when global financial disruption can change competitive positions of countries overnight.

In the case of lamb, we see an industry that has been severely damaged by imports. Without relief, the injury to the industry would have continued to worsen. The number of sheep being raised is at an all-time low. Prices have dropped precipitously. Lending institutions are increasingly unwilling to extend credit.

The industry did what it was supposed to do. It used the domestic legal process authorized by the WTO. That process is enforced through section 201 of the U.S. trade law. This is how the process should work and, in this case, is working.

I believe the reluctance of the executive branch over the past 15 years to take action under section 201 has been a serious mistake. The most recent example of this is the late action that was taken by the administration to deal with the surge of steel imports. The volume of steel imports now seems to be under control. But we are still faced with a dilemma. How can we ensure that the next time the steel sector, or any other sector, is threatened by a precipitous spike in imports, strong and rapid measures will be taken to provide relief to those industries?

Earlier this session, I introduced the Import Surge Relief Act. It would improve and expedite the way our Government deals with import surges. It would ease the standard that must be met to demonstrate that there is a causal link between imports and injury to an American industry. It would speed up the process for addressing import surges. It would provide for an early warning about import surges so action can be taken before the American industry is irreversibly damaged. All this is perfectly legal under the WTO.

Let me address a few remarks to the principal exporters of lamb to the United States—Australia and New Zealand. There has been a lot of misinformation coming from the industry and governments in those two countries.

This is not an attack on the lamb industry in Australia or New Zealand. Rather, it is a measure taken under U.S. trade law to provide temporary—and I underline the word ''temporary''—relief to a devastated American industry. The actions announced by the President are compatible with the WTO. Australia and New Zealand will continue to ship large quantities of lamb to the United States. Their exports would be able to grow each year.

The only difference is that the American lamb industry will stay in business and American workers will keep their jobs. Australia and New Zealand have the right to appeal to WTO. I am sure they will do that, and I am confident that the appeal will not be successful. Everyone should understand that this action was necessary to provide temporary relief to an industry that was hurting.

Let me conclude by again thanking the President and the administration officials who made possible this important action to provide remedies to the devastated lamb industry in the United States.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. KYL). Without objection, it is so ordered.

CONCLUSION OF MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Morning business is now closed.

PATIENTS' BILL OF RIGHTS ACT OF 1999

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will now proceed to the consideration of S. 1344, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

A bill (S. 1344) to amend the Public Health Service Act, the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974, and the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to protect consumers in managed care plans and other health coverage.

The Senate proceeded to consider the bill.

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I yield myself such time as I may consume from general debate on the bill under the unanimous consent agreement.

I am pleased that the Senate has begun debate on the Patients' Bill of Rights and the Patients' Bill of Rights Plus. There is a growing unease across this Nation about changes in how we receive our health care. People worry that if they or their loved ones become ill, their HMO may deny them coverage and force them to accept either inadequate care or financial ruin, or perhaps even both. They believe that vital decisions affecting their lives will be made not by a supportive family doctor but, rather, by an unfeeling bureaucracy.

Our goal this week should be to join together to work in a bipartisan way to enact legislation that accomplishes three major purposes.

First, it should protect patients' rights and hold HMOs accountable for the care they promise.

Second, it should expand, not contract, Americans' access to affordable health care.

And, third, it should improve health care quality and outcomes.

I believe all of us should be able to agree that medically necessary patient care should not be sacrificed to the bottom line and that health care decisions should be in the hands of medical professionals, not insurance accountants or trial lawyers.

We do face an extremely delicate balancing act as we attempt to respond to concerns about managed care without resorting to unduly burdensome Federal controls and mandates that will further drive up the cost of insurance and cause some people to lose their health insurance altogether.

That is the crux of the debate we are undertaking this week. The crux of this debate is how can we make sure that we address those critical concerns we all have about managed care without so driving up the cost of the health insurance people have—as the Kennedy bill would do—that we jeopardize coverage for thousands, indeed millions, of Americans.

As the President's Advisory Commission on Consumer Protection and Quality noted in its report, ''costs matter . . . the Commission has sought to balance the need for stronger consumer rights with the need to keep coverage affordable. . . Health coverage is the best consumer protection.''

I think President Clinton's quality commission hit it right. I believe they have stated exactly what the debate is before us. I, therefore, have been alarmed by recent reports that American employers everywhere, from giant multinational corporations to the tiny corner store, are facing huge hikes in medical insurance averaging 8 percent and sometimes soaring to 20 percent or more.

This is a remarkable contrast to the past few years when premiums rose less than 3 percent, if at all. I am particularly concerned about the impact these rising costs are having on small businesses and their employees.

A survey of small employers conducted by the United States Chamber of Commerce earlier this year found that, on average, small businesses were hit with a 20-percent premium hike last year. More important, of the small employers surveyed, 10 percent were forced to discontinue health care coverage for their employees because of these premium increases. Over half of the employers surveyed indicated that they switched to a lower cost plan, while an overwhelming majority indicated that they had passed the additional costs of these premium hikes on to their employees through increased deductibles, higher copays, or premium hikes.

This, too, is very troubling since it will induce many more employees, especially lower wage workers and their families, who are disproportionately affected by increased costs, to turn down coverage when it is offered to them. Indeed, in the HELP Committee, on which I serve, we saw a GAO report which indicated that an increasing number of American employees are turning down the health insurance offered by their employers because they simply cannot afford to pay their share of the costs.

It is no wonder that the ranks of uninsured Americans increased dramatically last year to 43 million people—the highest percentage in a decade. This is happening at a time when our economy is thriving. Imagine what could happen in an economic downturn.

We know that increasing health insurance premiums cause significant losses in coverage. That is the primary reason that I am so opposed to the Kennedy bill. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the Kennedy bill, that has been laid down before us, will increase health insurance premiums by an additional 6.1 percent over and above the premium increases we have already experienced or are likely to experience as a result of a resurgent increase in health care inflation.

The CBO report goes on to note that:

Employers could respond to premium increases in a variety of ways. They could drop health insurance [coverage] entirely, reduce the generosity of the benefit package [in other words, cut back on the benefits that are provided], increase cost-sharing by [their employees], or increase the employee's share of the premium.

CBO assumed that employers would deflect about 60 percent of the increase in premiums through these strategies. In other words, 60 percent of this increased cost is going to go right to American workers. The remaining increase in premiums would be passed on to workers in the form of lower wages. In short, it is the workers of America, it is the employees, who will be paying this increased cost.

Lewin Associates, a well-respected health consulting firm, in a study for