

local stakeholders to play a role in decision-making on Federal lands. It is this latter feature of the bill that has the potential to have a negative impact on the health of our forests.

I am deeply disappointed at the version of the bill that was just passed. For months I worked closely with my Senate colleagues to negotiate a compromise proposal that included safeguards to help ensure that the bill would not lead to increased exploitation of our federal timber resources. This earlier version of the bill (S. 1608), which passed the Senate by unanimous consent, benefitted greatly from changes that clarified the appropriate role of local communities in Federal land management decisions and directed local projects funded under this bill towards environmentally beneficial activities rather than commodity production. Unfortunately, many improvements that I fought for in the Senate-passed bill have either been discarded or weakened in H.R. 2389.

I pledge to monitor closely implementation of this Act to see if it results in local projects that involve unsustainable logging, salvage, and other types of environmentally damaging activities. I hope this does not materialize, but if it does, I will seek to make improvements to the Act.

DEATH OF E.S. JOHNNY WALKER

Mr. BINGAMAN. Mr. President, I rise to advise Members of the Senate that New Mexico lost a very distinguished citizen and a good friend with the death of E.S. Johnny Walker on Sunday at the age of 89. His life of public service began with 4 years in the Army in World War II. Subsequently, it included two terms in our State legislature in the House of Representatives in Santa Fe, followed by service as commissioner of our public lands in New Mexico and commissioner of the bureau of revenue. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1964 and served two terms here in Washington representing New Mexico in the House of Representatives.

Johnny is survived by his wife Polly, to whom he was married for 63 years; also by their two children, Mike Walker and Janet Walker Steele; also by grandchildren and great-grandchildren, colleagues, and, of course, many friends. I am proud to say that his friends included my family and, of course, me. We have known the Walkers for decades.

I fondly recall his friendship with my parents and with my uncle, John Bingaman, during the time when I was growing up in Silver City. He was a "man of the people" in the very best sense of that phrase. He worked very hard for the interest of the people of New Mexico, and he will be remembered warmly in our State for his humanity and for his great service.

RURAL TELECOMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Mr. GRAMS. Mr. President, I rise today to express my views toward Federal implementation of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and my support for a strong national rural telecommunications policy.

One of the most important responsibilities of a United States Senator is to exercise appropriate oversight of Federal regulatory agencies to ensure sound policy and the wisest use of taxpayers dollars. Toward this end, I have carefully monitored the Federal Communications Commission's implementation of the 1996 Telecommunications Act in an attempt to ensure that this agency follows the intent of Congress in developing a strong national rural telecommunications policy.

I am proud to have supported the historic 1996 Telecommunications Act which deregulated the telecommunications industry for the first time in 62 years. I believe this Act has begun to reach its promise of a competitive marketplace, lower prices, and greater consumer choice in services for every American. Since its passage, the telecommunications industry has grown dramatically, creating 230,000 more jobs nationwide, generating an additional \$57 billion in revenues, and fostering an environment in which billions of dollars has been invested in telecommunications infrastructure. Despite this promising news, I am very concerned that the FCC's implementation of the Act has stifled the expansion of some of these benefits into rural parts of Minnesota.

As a former small businessman, I often hear about the regulatory burdens experienced by my state's entrepreneurs and businesses. As someone who spent 23 years in the broadcasting industry, I also understand their frustration with the far-reaching regulatory authority of the Federal Communications Commission. It has become very clear to me that the administrative and regulatory burdens imposed upon small telecommunications providers reflect the Commission's neglect for the unique needs of rural telecommunications companies and their need for fairer regulatory treatment.

The concerns of rural telecommunications companies are underscored in a letter sent to me by Farmers Mutual Telephone Company General Manager Robert Hoffman, who wrote, "My concern with the FCC is all the additional filings and requirements they are placing on small telephone companies. A couple of years ago we didn't have any filings with the FCC. Now we have about ten annual filings which are confusing and labor intensive, and thus expensive for companies of our size. The FCC has no sympathy for small rural telecommunications companies."

As my colleagues know, this de-regulatory law has been the subject of litigation from the moment it was enacted due to what many perceive to be the FCC's over-regulatory approach to its

implementation. Far too often, the Commission's rules have gone beyond Congressional intent. In particular, I am disappointed by the Commission's implementation of sections of the Act which are intended to preserve universal service assistance and the deployment of advanced telecommunications services. I am sure that my colleagues would agree that universal service assistance is the cornerstone of an effective rural telecommunications policy.

In implementing the 1996 Act, the Commission has thus far failed to adhere to the important universal service principles established by Congress under this law. The Act specifically required the joint board on universal service and the FCC to base their universal service policies upon the following principles: the ability of quality services to be provided at just, reasonable and affordable rates; that all regions of the country should have access to advanced telecommunications services; that telecommunications services should be comparable to services in urban areas; and that universal service should be supported by specific and predictable funding mechanisms. Congress should clearly do more to hold the Commission's feet to the fire to ensure that there is proper implementation of universal service support.

I have worked hard in Congress to ensure that the decades-long policy of universal service is preserved and advanced and that there are adequate revenues to maintain rural networks. Earlier this Congress, I wrote to FCC Chairman Kennard to express my opposition to any proposal which would transfer authority over the Universal Service Fund to the Department of Treasury. I believe that such an approach would undermine universal service policy and could have an adverse impact upon small telephone carriers and the communities they serve. More importantly, this plan would place the Universal Service Fund at great risk of manipulation by the federal government and the excessive spending habits of Members of Congress. I am pleased that the Administration has finally agreed that is not "public money" and has withdrawn this ill-advised plan.

I also believe that the Rural Utilities Service telephone loan program is vital to the development of a strong rural telecommunications infrastructure, and an essential component of our national commitment to universal service. I have repeatedly written the Senate Appropriations Committee to urge funding for the Rural Utilities Service telephone loan program. I firmly believe that RUS telephone loans have helped to improve telephone service in rural and high cost areas. Through RUS financing, telephone borrowers have made significant improvements to telecommunications services throughout rural Minnesota.

My oversight of the FCC has also included efforts to make it easier for