H–1B VISAS

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, I rise today to express my frustration over the inability of the Senate to reach a unanimous consent agreement in regard to legislation that addresses the critical shortage of highly skilled workers in the information technology fields. On April 11, 2000, the Senate's Judiciary Committee favorably reported out S. 2045, The American Competitiveness in the 21st Century Act, by a vote of 16–2. I am pleased to be an original cosponsor of this important legislation. Unfortunately, this legislation is now being held hostage because some of my colleagues in the Senate wish to attach unrelated amendments to the bill.

There are very few remaining days left in this Congress. Before Congress adjourns for the year, we must pass the remaining appropriations bills, and have them signed into law. In addition, legislation extending Permanent Normal Trade Relations with China, and legislation reauthorizing the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, must be considered. Consequently, there simply is just not enough time for the Senate to debate numerous unrelated amendments on the H–1B visa bill.

Mr. President, our country's burgeoning economy has resulted in an extremely low unemployment rate nationwide. While I am proud of our economy, and our low nationwide unemployment rate, there does exist a tight labor market in many fields, especially the information technology fields. One need only look in the classified section of the Washington Post to see how many high-tech jobs are available in Northern Virginia. This tight labor market makes it difficult for the high-tech industry to fill job openings, and this difficulty is compounded by the fact that our American education system, for one reason or another, is not producing enough individuals with the interest and skills for employment in the information technology fields. If these jobs our not filled, our economy will suffer, and these American companies will move overseas to fill their jobs.

In 1998, Congress and the President recognized the serious effects that the tight labor market could have on the high-tech industry and our economy. In that year, Congress passed, and the President signed into law, legislation increasing the annual ceiling for admission of H–1B nonimmigrants from 65,000 to 115,000 in fiscal year 1999 and fiscal year 2000, and 107,500 in fiscal year 2001. This 1998 act also imposed a $500 per visa fee to fund training and scholarships for U.S. workers and students.

Nevertheless, despite increasing the H–1B ceiling just two years ago, that increase has proved to be woefully inadequate. In 1999, the H–1B visa ceiling was reached at the end of 9 months. This fiscal year, the ceiling was reached 6 months into the fiscal year. The effect of the H–1B ceiling being reached before the year's end is that these jobs will remain unfilled, which in turn will only hurt our economy.

The Senate Judiciary's Committee Report on S. 2045 states that the, ''shortage of skilled workers throughout the U.S. economy will result in a 5-percent drop in the growth rate of the GDP. That translates into approximately $200 billion in lost output, nearly $1,000 for every American.'' The Committee cites other studies that indicate that a shortage of information technology professionals is costing the U.S. economy as a whole $105 billion a year. I also found Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan's testimony before the Senate's Banking Committee quite compelling. Mr. Greenspan endorsed S. 2045 in response to a question from Senator PHIL GRAMM, and then stated that, ''The benefits of bringing in people to do the work here, rather than doing the work elsewhere, to me, should be pretty self-evident.''

Now, let me state clearly, it is my preference that these jobs in the information technology fields would be filled with Americans. However, due to the low unemployment rate and the lack of unemployed educated high-tech workers, filling the numerous openings in the information technology fields with Americans is simply not realistic. Therefore, to continue to propel our economy forward, we must pass legislation such as S. 2045 to fill these critical positions in our information technology sector.

This legislation, though, does more than just increase the number of H–1B visas to temporarily fill the job openings in the high-tech industry that cannot be filled by Americans. This bill contains very important provisions that continue the imposition of a $500 fee per H–1B visa petition. It is estimated that this fee, with the increase in the H–1B ceiling, will raise roughly $450 million over three years. This money will create 40,000 scholarships for U.S. workers and U.S. students, thereby helping them to choose education in these important fields. Our goal should be to fill these American jobs with trained American workers. These provisions of S. 2045 takes us toward that goal.

Mr. President, in closing, I cannot overstate how important it is for our country's economy to raise the ceiling on H–1B visas, and to provide funding for the training of Americans to fill these jobs. I implore my colleagues to reconsider their demand for votes on unrelated amendments on this legislation. At this late stage in the Congress, demanding votes on unrelated amendments on this legislation will kill this important bill, leave very important jobs in the information technology sector unfilled, and ultimately, hurt our economy.

VISA WAIVER PILOT PROGRAM

Mr. WYDEN. Mr. President, I wish to explain to my colleagues the reasons for my objection to a unanimous consent request for the Senate to adopt legislation to make the Visa Waiver Pilot Program permanent, H.R. 3767. I do so consistent with the commitment I have made to explain publicly any so-called ''holds'' that I may place on legislation.

I regret that I am compelled to object to this measure at this point but I do so for reasons similar to those given previously. I believe the Senate should not allow the security of millions of rural Americans to be ignored while we press ahead with legislation to take care of immigration matters.

Since April, a prominent Senate Republican leader has had a de facto hold on a bipartisan bill of critical importance to the security of those who live in rural counties, S. 1608, The Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act of 2000. But time is running out. It is the end of July; there are fewer than 26 legislative days left. People in rural counties across America who have strained under dwindling Federal resource funds need this legislation. They should not be made to wait.

S. 1608 addresses the problems 709 rural counties in 42 states face in trying to fund schools, roads and other basic county services with drastically declining Federal timber payments. These problems affect some 800,000 school children and millions of people. For example, Grant County in eastern Oregon has lost 90 percent of its timber receipts, forcing it to turn to a four-day school week as a cost-saving measure.

This bipartisan bill provides a balanced solution to the problem. The Energy and Natural Resources Committee reported it by voice vote, and it is supported by hundreds of counties, labor organizations, education groups, and the National Association of Counties. I regret having to take this action but am compelled at this point in the legislative year to seek every opportunity to move this critically important legislation.

RURAL AMERICA PROSPERITY ACT OF 2000

Mr. BURNS. Mr. President, I rise today to express my support of the Rural America Prosperity Act of 2000. I am pleased to be a cosponsor, along with my colleagues, Senators LUGAR, ROBERTS, and SANTORUM. I am a cosponsor of this bill because it gives our farmers some of the tools they need to succeed in today's economy and works to finish what was a key tool in our current agriculture policy.

In 1996, we passed a new version of the farm bill. This legislation began the process of eliminating government control over farmers. No longer did the government dictate what crops farmers could plant. Farmers could use their own discretion, honed by generations of living on the land, as to how their land and finances would be managed. The farm bill made numerous steps in the right direction, but there is more we can do. This, I believe, is a very important step to make this legislation better and more flexible.

This legislation takes us a few steps further down the road to better farming policy. It includes three important tax provisions that I feel are vital to the survival of Montana's and America's farmers. The first is the repeal of the estate tax, which would allow farms to be passed along to the next generation. Without the repeal, sons and daughters are forced to sell the only home they have ever known to pay the estate taxes, when their parents die. Family farms are disappearing fast enough without this added burden.

The second vital tax provision is the exclusion of capital gains from the sale of farmland. This simply puts farm owners on an even playing field with homeowners, who already benefit from exclusion of capital gains. The third tax provision lies in the area of health insurance. Farmers, and others who are self-employed, do not have health insurance provided for them. They must cover the full cost themselves. This legislation would give those who are self-employed a tax deduction for the cost of their insurance.

Farmers, more than any other sector of our economy are likely to experience substantial fluctuations in income. Market forces in farming are very unique: drought, flooding, infestation and disease all play a vital role in a farmer's bottom line. And it's not often when the elements of mother nature allow for a profitable harvest more than once in several years. I believe that farmers need to be able to smooth out fluctuations in their income in order to offset the effect of the high marginal tax rates that occur in years when both yield and prices are up. Income averaging is an important tool for farmers. Currently, alternative minimum taxes prevent many farmers from receiving the benefits of income averaging. This bill would fix that. Farmers will be able to put up to 20 percent of their annual farm income into a FARRM account that is deducted from their taxes.

As many of you know, while the rest of the economy is surging ahead, agriculture has been left behind in the dust. Prices are dropping, and farmers and ranchers are going out of business. We must assist in their survival and the development of new markets is an essential part of that survival. Imposing trade sanctions hurts American farmers and ranchers. Sanctions have effectively shut out American agricultural producers from 11 percent of the world market, with sanctions imposed on various products of over 60 countries. They allow our competitors an open door to those markets where sanctions are imposed by the United States. In times like these our producers need every available marketing option open to them. We cannot afford lost market share. Foreign markets offer a great opportunity for our agricultural products and negotiating trade agreements may put life back into our rural communities.

The farm bill took bold steps, but we cannot stop there. This legislation continues to make those steps towards a better situation for our farmers.

IT IS TIME TO UPDATE THE MISSOURI RIVER MASTER MANUAL

Mr. JOHNSON. Mr. President, I am pleased to take this opportunity to join my colleagues to discuss the issue of how the Missouri River should be managed by the Corps of Engineers and to address the remarks made earlier this week by my friends and colleagues from Missouri, Senators BOND and ASHCROFT. This issue has come before the Senate because some of my colleagues from states downstream on the Missouri River are attempting to politicize the management of the River.

They are trying to politicize this issue by adding a rider to the Energy and Water Appropriations bill to prevent the Corps of Engineers from changing the 40 year old Master Manual that sets the management policy of the River.

Let me assure you and the rest of my colleagues that after 40 years, the management of the Missouri River is in serious need of an update to reflect the current realities of the River. As the discussion—and sometimes, heated debate—continues with respect to the Missouri River and its various uses, the Army Corps of Engineers has proposed a revision of the Master Manual which governs how the River is managed.

I was among those who first called for a revision of the Master Manual because I firmly believed then, as I do now, that over the years, we in the Upper Basin states have lived with an unfortunate lack of parity under the current management practices on the Missouri River. It is no secret that we continue to suffer from an upstream vs. downstream conflict of interest on Missouri River uses. For example, traditionally, navigation has been emphasized on the Missouri River, to the detriment of river ecosystems and recreational uses. I recognize that navigation activities often support midwestern agriculture, however the navigation industry has been declining since it peaked in the late 1970's. It is no longer appropriate to grossly favor navigation above other uses of the river.

Those of us from the upstream states have been working for more than 10 years to get the Corps of Engineers to finally make changes in the 40 year old Master Manual for the Missouri River.

After more than 40 years, the time has come for the management of the Missouri River to reflect the current economic realities of a $90 million annual recreation impact upstream, versus a $7 million annual navigation impact downstream. The Corps has been managing the Missouri River for navigation for far too long and it is time to finally bring the Master Manual into line with current economic realities.

As I stated earlier, the process to review and update the Master Manual began more than 10 years ago, in 1989, in response to concerns regarding the operation of the main stem dams, mainly during drought periods. A draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was published in September 1994 and was followed by a public comment period. In response to numerous comments, the Corps agreed to prepare a Revised DEIS.

After years of revisions and updates that have dragged this process out to ridiculous lengths, the Corps finally came forward with alternatives to the current Master Manual, including the ''split season'' alternative, which I strongly support, along with my colleagues from the Upper Basin states. Those of us from the States in the Upper Basin are determined to work aggressively for the interests of our region. For decades our states have made many significantly sacrifices which have benefited people living further south along the Missouri River.

Now is the time to finally bring an outdated and unfair management plan for the Missouri River up to date with modern economic realities.

MOUNT HELM BAPTIST CHURCH

Mr. LOTT. Mr. President, today I rise to honor the oldest African-American church in the City of Jackson, Mississippi, Mount Helm Baptist Church. Not only is it the oldest African-American church, but it is also one of the oldest churches in the State of Mississippi. Throughout this year, Mount Helm will be celebrating its 165th Anniversary with a theme ''Celebrating Our Heritage: Anticipating Our Future''. This year's theme should be echoed in the hearts and minds of everyone. This church clearly exemplifies this theme. Mount Helm, which was founded in 1835, has continuously been a community leader and a strong advocate for Christianity and the spreading of the Gospel.

Prior Lee, a prominent Jacksonian, developed a deep interest in religion