

## **Congressional Closeup** by Carl Osgood

### **Senate sanctions debate intersects farm crisis**

On July 9, the Senate voted 98-0 to exempt U.S. Department of Agriculture credits for farm exports, from sanctions imposed on India and Pakistan for their May nuclear tests. The bill was introduced by Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), with 21 co-sponsors, and was considered on an emergency basis because the government of Pakistan said it would tender offers for 350,000 tons of wheat, worth about \$40 million, on July 15, for August delivery.

McConnell argued that cutting off U.S. food exports cannot alter a targeted country's behavior after the fact. "There is no leverage," he said, "in curtailing or cutting off our sales; there is only loss of income for our farmers, our ranchers, our producers." He called the Pakistani tender "unusually important," in view of the fact that U.S. wheat exports to the rest of Asia have declined significantly because of the economic crisis there.

Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) pointed out that because of U.S. unilateral sanctions, 10% of the world's wheat market is off-limits to the American farmer. "I don't think we ought to cut off food shipments," he said. "All that does is hurt the poor people and hungry people around the world."

The debate reflected a growing realization that current sanctions law simply doesn't work the way its proponents have claimed. Most important were the comments, in this regard, of John Glenn (D-Ohio), who authored the original 1994 legislation under which the sanctions were imposed on India and Pakistan. After supporting the concept of sanctions, he admitted that "we do need definitely to rethink sanctions across the board and what we mean by them." Glenn has introduced a new bill which would give the President more flexibility when the

sanctions law is triggered. It would give the President 45 days to build multilateral support for sanctions, and Congress 15 days thereafter to respond to the President's recommendation.

The debate also provided the context for demands to re-open the 1996 "Freedom to Farm Act," a sentiment which has been building because of the collapse of the farm economy. Dorgan called the 1996 bill the "underlying problem," and added, "We are pulling the rug out from family farmers in price support and calling it freedom to farm. It is like taking the minimum wage to a dollar an hour and calling it freedom to work."

Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) told reporters at the White House on July 13, that he had raised the issue with President Clinton. "We're not talking about reinstating farm subsidies," he said, "but we are talking about dealing with the crisis that now exists in agriculture virtually across the Great Plains in particular."

### **Health insurance debate heats up**

Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.), after a meeting with President Clinton on July 13, told reporters that "we all agree that at the very top of our priority list is the Patients Bill of Rights, our patient-protection legislation." Daschle said that Clinton and Vice President Al Gore told him and House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) that they are "prepared to do whatever possible to move the legislation as quickly as possible, so long as it's comprehensive."

Gephardt said, "They [Republicans] say they don't like our bill," but "they have yet to have a bill out of the Republican side." The House GOP

leadership has refused to schedule any of a number of pending bills that have broad bipartisan support.

These comments followed a week in which the partisan rhetoric in the Senate reached new levels of vitriol (the House remained in recess an extra week after July 4). On July 7, Daschle brought up the Democrats' patients protection bill as an amendment to the Veterans Administration-Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill, but Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), rather than allowing a debate, pulled the bill from the floor and instead moved on to the Internal Revenue Service reform bill conference report.

Lott, in an appearance on the CBS News program "Face the Nation" on July 12, complained that the usual Democratic answer is "a government takeover," like the Clinton administration's 1993 health care proposal. "Their ultimate goal," he said, "is for the government to control and run everything in our life and health care." He added that the Democrats' demand to allow people to sue their health maintenance organizations (HMOs) is only for the benefit of "their plaintiff attorneys buddies." Lott reported that the GOP is working on their own bill, but it excludes the provision allowing lawsuits against HMOs.

On the same day, Bill Frist (R-Tenn.), a surgeon and one of Lott's appointed experts in the GOP's health insurance reform task force, argued that "you can't sue your way to better quality in health care," on the ABC News program "This Week." However, he was chastised by Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), who challenged him on the GOP's connections to the insurance industry and the GOP's failure to schedule debate on any of the patients' protection bills that are currently pending before the Senate.