

Strengthening Rural America

Authored by U.S. Senators Harry Reid of Nevada and Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas

We live in a nation of many blessings. As Americans, we sometimes forget that many of those blessings, such as a safe and affordable food supply, come from the heartland of rural America. Unfortunately, for the last seven years, rural America, and the families that live and work there, has also been forgotten by President Bush and his allies in Congress.

With his latest budget, President Bush has demonstrated once again that rural America is not a priority for him. While spending billions of dollars building roads and schools in Iraq, he asks rural Americans to sit tight while their own infrastructures are in dire need.

Senate Democrats have always made rural America a top priority. In our first year in the majority, Democrats raised the minimum wage for the first time in a decade. We passed an energy bill that invests in renewable energy and creates new technologies and jobs in rural counties, and we passed the biggest increase in college aid since the GI Bill. Senate Democrats also provided billions of dollars for veterans' health care to ensure that we keep our promise to our veterans, most of whom come from rural areas.

As the Senate Majority Leader and the Chair for Rural Outreach, we are proud of our successes and will continue fighting for policies that confront the challenges facing rural America.

Two months into 2008, Congress is on the verge of passing the most significant farm bill reform in our country's history. It provides resources for nutrition, conservation, rural development, and renewable energy programs. We hope that the President and Congressional Republicans will work with us to pass this vital bill.

Healthcare remains a top priority. We must strengthen Medicare and Medicaid. Long term-renewal for children's health care must also become a reality. Last year, Congress expanded the children's health care program to provide care for 10 million low-income children. Unfortunately, President Bush vetoed this bill twice, denying care to children who need it most.

Rural hospitals and community health care also needs help. They are the backbones of our communities. Not only are they some of the largest employers in rural communities, but they provide the quality care the residents deserve.

Ensuring our children get the best education possible has always been a struggle in rural America. We must make it easier for school districts to attract and retain qualified teachers. We must also meet the challenge of getting students to and from rural schools. Rural school buses are forced to travel hundreds of thousands of miles per year, wearing them out quickly and leave cash-strapped schools struggling to replace them. We must give rural schools the tools and technologies they need to ensure their students graduate able to compete in a global economy.

Lastly, recent disasters have served as a wake-up call that we need to be investing in our nation's infrastructure. Clean drinking water, flood controls, bridges, and roads are needs in every community. These investments make our nation more secure and create jobs all over rural America.

Like so many Americans, we are the products of the communities in which we were raised. As the son of a hardrock miner in Searchlight, Nevada, and the daughter of a rice farmer in Helena, Arkansas, we share a deep love for rural America, which drives us to strengthen and support the numerous and diverse communities throughout our great nation. As we continue our work in the Senate this year, you can rest assured that we will continue to focus on the needs of rural America.