

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington – September 16, 2005

Wrong Move on Mercury Emissions

This week, the Senate failed to send a message to President Bush that public health and safety must be put ahead of energy industry profits. By defeating, on a vote of 47-51, the Leahy-Collins resolution, Senate Republicans squandered an opportunity to stop a dangerous Administration policy change on mercury emissions.

BACKGROUND: REVERSING CLEAN AIR PROGRESS - In the last days of the Clinton Administration, the EPA determined mercury to be a toxic pollutant and thus subject to strict regulation under the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990. By the end of 2003, the EPA was to formulate a plan for reducing toxic emissions from power plants. The Clinton plan required mercury-emitting power plants to install specific control systems by 2008, helping to reduce pollution by as much as 90 percent.

However, in December 2003, the Bush Administration announced a proposal that would significantly relax the restrictions on emissions of mercury from American power plants. And, on March 15 of this year, this dangerous reversal of policy was put into effect by the Environmental Protection Agency.

By calling for only a 70 percent reduction in emissions by 2018 – ten years later than the Clean Air Act intended - the rule puts public health and safety at great risk.

SENATE FAILS TO SEND PUBLIC HEALTH MESSAGE - On Tuesday, I voted in favor of a bipartisan joint resolution, known as the Leahy-Collins resolution, condemning this Bush Administration rule. I've been strongly opposed to allowing increased mercury emissions into the atmosphere.

In both March 2004 and 2005, I joined dozens of my colleagues in sending letters to the EPA Administrators asking that the rule – which contains verbatim industry language – be withdrawn and rewritten to properly safeguard public health. And I cosponsored the Leahy-Collins resolution, because I knew it was important to send a message to the President that we need aggressive plans to improve our air and water quality – not a relaxation of federal standards. I'm extremely disappointed by this vote, but I'll keep fighting to reduce toxic mercury emissions.

Standing up for Our Veterans

As more veterans return home from serving our country overseas, I'm leading an effort in the Senate to make sure they get what they need to make a smooth transition. I've held roundtables and official Senate hearings with returning service members throughout our state. I'm committed to helping our veterans get the help and respect they deserve.

WALLA WALLA/KITSAP: HELP FOR HOMELESS VETS - On Wednesday, I announced that the federal government will provide more than \$700,000 to assist homeless veterans in Walla Walla and Kitsap County. Details of the grants are as follows:

- **Walla Walla** - \$400,000 for 14 beds;
- **Kitsap County** - \$317,000 for 40 beds, a new service center, and a van.

For too long, homeless veterans have been forgotten heroes. These new facilities and services will make a big difference for those who deserve our respect and support.

VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE HEARING – On Thursday, the Veterans' Affairs Committee met to mark up two veterans' healthcare proposals. I supported one proposal - passed by the committee - to expand and improve Vet Centers, which provide convenient and confidential readjustment counseling to returning veterans.

Don't Privatize VA Jobs - However, at the hearing, I also voiced my strong opposition to another proposal that came before the committee, S. 1182. This bill would waste millions of scarce VA healthcare dollars on a study to explore the outsourcing of dedicated VA employees.

I noted that VA employees have been praised for their outstanding work protecting and caring for veterans who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina. In fact, a recent report by VA Secretary Jim Nicholson called the efforts of VA employees "heroic." Yet the committee stood ready to slap those employees in the face by privatizing these jobs. We should be rewarding these VA employees, not insulting them.

Not only is privatization a bad idea, but the cost of studying privatization could be more than \$300 million. At a time when VA facilities have been damaged by Hurricane Katrina, and the VA itself if facing budget shortfalls and rising healthcare costs, I cannot support wasting scarce healthcare dollars on a wasteful and misguided study. That's one reason why I opposed S. 1182.

Katrina Veterans Deserve More Help – I also voted against it because it failed to provide adequate support for veterans who have been affected by Hurricane Katrina. So, throughout the hearing, I worked to make the bill more helpful to veterans who were impacted by Hurricane Katrina. I supported an amendment by Ranking Member Daniel Akaka (D-HI) that would help middle-income veterans who reside in regions affected by Hurricane Katrina. Unfortunately, that amendment was weakened during the markup so that it only provides affected veterans with a token level of assistance.

Despite my opposition, the bill passed the committee, and will move to the Senate floor. I believe our veterans and VA employees deserve better, and I'll continue to fight for them.

Sign up to get periodic updates on my work for our veterans:
<http://murray.senate.gov/vetupdates>

Keeping Our Ports Secure

MORE MONEY FOR FERRY SECURITY – On Thursday, I announced that the federal government will provide more than \$7.2 million to improve security throughout the Washington State Ferries system. This funding comes in the latest round of Port Security grants awarded by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. The Bush Administration has repeatedly tried to cut this program, but I've led the effort in the Senate to maintain and increase port security grant funding. The funding is as follows:

- **Washington State Ferries** - \$6.4 million to improve access control and monitoring, and \$63,800 for video monitoring;
- **Washington State Patrol** - \$64,340 to upgrade training facilities for the explosive canine unit; and
- **Bainbridge Island Police Department** - \$637,646 for video surveillance and fencing.

These investments will help keep our ferries safe and secure for everyone who rides them. Ferries are a critical part of our state's transportation system, and I'm pleased that we're taking steps to keep them safe.

Get more on my work to improve port security:
<http://murray.senate.gov/portsecurity>

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