TRADE: SENATE AND HOUSE COMMITTEES REVIEW TRADE POLICY AGENDA

On Tuesday, January 27, 2015, the Senate Finance Committee convened for a hearing entitled "President Obama's 2015 Trade Policy Agenda." The House Ways and Means Committee also convened on Tuesday for a hearing on the U.S. Trade Policy Agenda.

In his opening statement to the Senate Finance Committee, Chairman Orrin Hatch (UT) supported the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (T-TIP), reaffirming the role of Trade Promotion Authority (TPA). "I believe Congressional renewal of TPA will unleash new energy in our international trade agenda, helping to propel our economy to greater growth and prosperity," he explained.

Ambassador Michael B. Froman, U.S. Trade Representative, was the sole witness at both hearings.

"In 2013, the most recent year on record, American exports reached a record high of $2.3 trillion and supported a record-breaking 11.3 million jobs. It's clear, more exports means more good jobs and
more jobs are dependent upon exports than ever before," stated Ambassador Froman.

Priorities for the United States Trade Representative (USTR) in 2015 include securing Trade Promotion Authority with bipartisan support, successful conclusion of TPP and the Informational Technology Agreement (ITA), and the advancement of T-TIP, the Trade in Services Agreement (TiSA), and the Environmental Goods Agreement (EGA). Concerns include regulation enforcements, currency manipulation, agricultural markets, biotechnology and trademark issues, and the effects on middle class wages. In addressing concerns about a level playing field, Ambassador Froman vowed that the Administration prioritizes a reduction in trade barriers and a rise in labor and environmental standards across the board.

For more information, go to:
http://www.finance.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=5ef11836-5056-a032-5292-dc24774c7fe1 and

EDUCATION: SENATE COMMITTEE DISCUSS TEACHER SUPPORT FIXES TO NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee held a hearing titled "Fixing No Child Left Behind: Supporting Teachers and School Leaders" on Tuesday, January 27, 2015. Chairman Lamar Alexander (TN) grappled with questions concerning teacher evaluations in his opening statement: "How do we determine what is an effective teacher? How do we relate student achievement to teacher performance?" Part of the solution he proposed is to return evaluation systems to states and school districts.

Witnesses included Dan Goldhaber, Director, National Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data and Education Research and Center for Education Data and Research, University of Washington, Bothell, Wash.; Terry Holliday, Commissioner of Education, Commonwealth of Kentucky, Frankfort, Ky.; Saul Hinojosa, Superintendent of Schools, Somerset Independent School District, Somerset, Texas; Rachelle Moore, first grade teacher, Madrona K-8 School, Seattle, Wash.; and Christine Handy-Collins, principal, Gaithersburg High School, Gaithersburg, Md.

"The most important educator policies are controlled by states -- regulation of teacher education programs, licensure, induction and mentoring, tenure, layoffs, and often compensation," explained Dr. Goldhaber. He argued that states need reliable information in order to make such important policy decisions, cautioning against the temptation to abandon statewide annual testing altogether. Additionally, he advocated for the assessment of achievement data over time rather than at a single point in time.

Ms. Moore emphasized the importance of investing in new teachers and maintaining professional development. Ms. Handy-Collins spoke about properly incentivizing teachers and administrators to remain in high-need areas for long periods of time.

All witnesses except Dr. Golhaber agreed that testing in classrooms could be decreased by at least 50%. Dr. Goldhaber qualified the opinion by adding that states often administer exams in excess of what is mandated by No Child Left Behind.
ENERGY: SENATE COMMITTEE DEBATES LIQUID NATURAL GAS EXPORTS

The Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources convened on Thursday, January 29, 2015 for a legislative hearing on S.33, the "LNG Permitting Certainty and Transparency Act."

Chairwoman Lisa Murkowski (AK) expressed support for the expedition of liquefied natural gas (LNG) exports from the United States in her opening statement. Senator Martin Heinrich (NM) and Senator John Barrasso (WY) are the lead bipartisan sponsors. The energy policy debate on the Keystone Pipeline served as an important backdrop to the committee hearing.

Witnesses included Christopher A. Smith, Assistant Secretary of Fossil Energy at the Department of Energy; Paul N. Cicio, President, Industrial Energy Consumers of America; Martin. J. Durbin, president and CEO, America's Natural Gas Alliance; Ross E. Eisenberg, Vice President, Energy and Resources Policy, National Association of Manufacturers; and David Koranyi, Director, Eurasian Energy Future Initiative, Atlantic Council.

Due to improved drilling technologies in the U.S., domestic natural gas production has increased. Meanwhile, the demand for natural gas has risen in international markets, which has caused an increase in applications to receive LNG exports from the United States. Section 2 of S. 33 would require the Secretary of Energy to issue a final decision on any application for the authorization to export natural gas under section 3(a) of the Natural Gas Act (NGA) not later than 45 days after the conclusion of the environmental review required by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Section 3 of S. 33 would require that exporters of LNG report to the Department of Energy (DOE) the countries to which it has been shipped, and that DOE publish that information on its website. The DOE has discretion to make import and export decisions according to the public interest.

However, Mr. Cicio criticized the fact that neither the NGA) nor DOE defines public interest. "The 'public interest' is NOT the same as the 'national interest.' The public interest is that which produces the most good for the most people. It is NOT a gross economic net benefit calculation such as that used by the DOE," he testified, voicing concerns about gas and electricity prices for consumers in the United States while competing with countries that subsidize such resources.

Mr. Koranyi highlighted the geopolitical context of the LNG discussion and claimed that U.S. LNG exports would reduce global prices, thus stabilizing European natural gas markets. "Historically, the U.S. has been promoting transparency and open markets, and opposing resource nationalism to the great benefit of the whole world. Introducing that transparency to the export licensing procedure will be critical to bolster trust in America's global leadership," he stated in support of S. 33.

For more information, please visit:

CRIMINAL JUSTICE: HOUSE PASSES SEVERAL BILLS TO CURB HUMAN TRAFFICKING

The House convened on Monday, January 26, 2015 to consider several bills aimed at curbing human trafficking. "Around 30,000 American youth are at risk of sexual commercial exploitation and trafficking each year. That's why the House of Representatives is considering a number of bills this week that seeks to ensure that human trafficking victims are treated as victims and have access to the
services they desperately need," explained Congressman Tim Walberg (MI) in his statement in support for H.R. 469.

A description of the bills and their status is as follows:

1) H.R. 514 - Human Trafficking Prioritization: "To prioritize the fight against human trafficking within the Department of State according to congressional intent in the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. "Agreed to by voice vote.

2) H.R. 515 - International Megan's Law to Prevent Demand for Child Sex Trafficking: "To protect children from exploitation, especially sex trafficking in tourism, by providing advance notice of intended travel by registered child-sex offenders outside the United States to the government of the country of destination, requesting foreign governments to notify the United States when a known child-sex offender is seeking to enter the United States, and for other purposes." Agreed to by voice vote.

3) H.R. 357 - Human Trafficking Prevention Act: "To amend the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 to expand the training for Federal Government personnel related to trafficking in persons, and for other purposes." Agreed to by voice vote.

4) H.R. 468 - Enhancing Services for Runaway and Homeless Victims for Youth Trafficking Act of 2015: "To amend the Runaway and Homeless Youth Act to increase knowledge concerning, and improve services for, runaway and homeless youth who are victims of trafficking." Agreed to by voice vote.


6) H.R. 246 - To improve the response to victims of child sex trafficking: "To improve the response to victims of child sex trafficking." Passed with a vote of 411-0 on Tuesday, January 27.

RESOURCES: HOUSE COMMITTEE CONSIDERS EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT REFORMS

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management convened on Tuesday, January 29, 2015 for a hearing entitled "Rebuilding After the Storm: Lessening Impacts and Speeding Recovery." In response to the rising costs dedicated to emergency management, the committee discussed key drivers of cost increases, the use of federal resources to rebuild in the wake of a disaster, and ways to ensure less damage and fewer people hurt in future disasters.


"FEMA plays an important role in helping state and local agencies, prepare, respond to, and address the threat of wild land fires," stated Mr. Fennessy. He outlined measures that could be taken in order to better serve localities, which included flexibility from FEMA in evaluating applications for funding (specifically, the Fire Management Assistance Grant) and steady Congressional funding to allow FEMA to mitigate risks and stabilize funding for prevention and suppression of future incidents.
Among the factors that influence cost increases in emergency management include aging infrastructure, population growth and density in vulnerable zones, and decreased Congressional funding, especially as it relates to risk mitigation. Administrator Fugate expressed the need to take a holistic approach during disasters in order to address needs, citing the lack of partnership with HUD to provide permanent affordable housing in rebuilding after Hurricane Katrina. Additionally, he encouraged incentives for states to manage smaller disasters, instead of waiting for federal intervention, and suggested cost sharing back to the first dollar spent by a state on disaster management.

For more information, please visit: