Congressman
G.K. BUTTERFIELD
1st District of North Carolina

Contact Information

WASHINGTON, DC
413 Cannon HOB
Washington, DC 20515
(202) 225-3101 Phone
(202) 225-3354 Fax

NORTH CAROLINA
Wilson District Office
216 West Nash Street
Wilson, NC 27893
(252) 237-9816 Phone
(252) 291-0356 Fax

Weldon District Office
311 West 2nd Street
Weldon, NC 27890
(252) 538-4123 Phone
(252) 538-6516 Fax

Williamston District Office
415 East Boulevard
Williamston, NC 27892
(252) 789-4939 Phone
(252) 729-8113 Fax

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Bill Advances Helping Poor Rural Communities

My legislation aimed at making it easier for rural communities to acquire surplus federal electronic equipment at little or no cost moved toward a House vote after being marked up and approved by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform.

The Federal Electronic Equipment Donation Act of 2007 (FEED Act), H.R. 752, was approved by a unanimous voice vote and will likely come before the full House for a vote sometime in the next few weeks.

I put the legislation forward after Roper, N.C. Mayor Bunny Sanders contacted my office because of the difficulty in securing federal surplus electronic equipment for the town's Technology Center. While there is an executive order directing the donation excess federal equipment to communities, it has shortcomings and lacks the force of law.

The federal government spends an enormous amount of taxpayers' money on basic office technology. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's budget alone, for example, includes more than $110 million in annual technology-related costs. Once equipment becomes slightly outdated, it should be put back into use by the many needy cities, towns, counties, schools and libraries across the country.

The FEED Act would streamline the process for donating excess and surplus electronic equipment to small cities, towns, counties, schools, libraries and community-based educational non-profit organizations. The legislation gives preference to poorer communities, which often have the greatest needs. The act would direct federal agencies to transfer excess equipment to the General Services Administration (GSA) for transfer to the qualifying recipient at little or no cost.

The bill is particularly important to communities in eastern North Carolina and could be an important tool in building the electronic infrastructure for local governments, schools, libraries and educational non-profits. Many of the communities I represent need every bit of help they can get, and hopefully this will free up some resources that can be used to address other pressing needs.

Butterfield pointed out that a great deal of money is spent by federal agencies on electronic equipment that is required to meet their needs. The U.S. Department of Agriculture's budget alone, for example, includes more than $110 million in annual technology-related costs.

Regulating Greenhouse Gas Emissions

The House Committee on Energy and Commerce's Subcommittee on Energy this week met to address the issue of what greenhouse gas regulations can be expected if Congress fails to pass comprehensive climate change legislation.

During the hearing I made the following opening statement:
Good morning. Welcome to all of our panelists and thank you for coming to testify today. I'd like to start by expressing my appreciation to Mr. Boucher and Mr. Dingell for the thoughtful and methodical way they have approached the development of climate change legislation.

I want to be clear, I share the same sense of urgency on climate change as every other Member of this Committee, but we must continue to approach this as thoughtfully as possible. I have serious concerns about how low-income communities will be impacted by a climate change bill that is not carefully crafted, but having these hearings to discuss the many issues we must consider will pay dividends.

The Energy and Air Quality Subcommittee convenes today to discuss the issue of the Environmental Protection Agency regulating greenhouse gases. This authority was granted by the Supreme Court's recent ruling on Massachusetts vs. EPA in early 2007 that defined carbon dioxide as a pollutant under the Clean Air Act, and therefore eligible to be regulated under that statute. Based upon that landmark ruling, it could be possible for the EPA to take action to regulate greenhouse gas emissions before this subcommittee, or Congress, can construct a roadmap for regulating the gases that contribute to global warming.

And so the issue ultimately becomes one of action, or inaction, because there are some that want to delay this subcommittee from moving forward with climate change legislation, such as cap and trade. However, the Massachusetts vs. EPA ruling should serve as a wake-up call to every Member of Congress and to the public at large, that delay is no longer a viable option.

I'd like to welcome all of our witnesses and begin by introducing the only witness from our first panel, Mr. Bob Meyers, Principal Deputy Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation in the Environmental Protection Agency. Thank you for coming.

We also have four witnesses testifying for the second panel, starting off with Mr. David Doniger with the Natural Resources Defense Council, Raymond Ludwiszewski, partner at Gibson, Dunn, and Crutcher, Ms. Lisa Heinzerling, Professor of Law at Georgetown University and Mr. Paul Glaser, a partner at Troutman Sanders LLP here in Washington with a background in environmental law.

Again, I appreciate you all for providing such a diverse array of knowledge and experience to assist this subcommittee to understand how best to move forward. Thank you.

President Signs Second Chance Act

Congress recently approved legislation aimed at reducing prison recidivism rates and improving the high-poverty communities where individuals leaving prison often settle. This week, President Bush signed the Second Chance Act into law.

The Second Chance Act provides an opportunity for ex-offenders to re-order their steps in a more stable and law-abiding direction. This law restores rehabilitation into our judicial system and hope in individuals. It provides opportunities for ex-offenders to develop employable skills, and establishes support systems for youthful offenders.

This initiative underscores the belief that each one of us is valuable and has something positive to contribute to society. We must nurture this ideal or risk losing entire generations of young men to crime.

The Unites States has the highest incarceration rate in the world, with more than 650,000 individuals released from prison and another 9 million from jails each year. Most are low-income minority men, and most return to areas of concentrated poverty. Within just three years, statistics suggest that nearly half will return to prison.

These individuals face significant barriers to successful reentry and reintegration. Over half are functionally illiterate or read below a fourth grade level, many suffer from mental illness, and up to 25 percent have serious health problems like Hepatitis C, tuberculosis and AIDS.

The bipartisan Second Chance Act of 2007 authorizes $165 million in yearly spending to provide support that will help to ensure the success of ex-offenders' reentry into society. Programs run by states and local organizations will build upon existing services so that former prisoners can successfully rejoin their local communities. By improving former prisoners' job prospects, reentry programs help these people avoid committing another crime and contributing to the concentrated poverty of many areas.

The Act includes provisions that:

•Authorize demonstration projects that promote successful reentry by connecting prisoners to comprehensive services and creating specially designed task forces that have the goal of reducing recidivism.

•Authorize the Attorney General to establish a National Adult and Juvenile Offender Reentry Resource Center to assist grantees in implementing their reentry programs.

•Assist state, tribal, and local organizations in creating or expanding drug treatment programs as alternatives to incarceration.

•Improve access to vocational, technical, and academic education for inmates in both adult and juvenile facilities.

•Lift restrictions on prisoner access to certain educational and reading materials.

•Award grants to nonprofit organizations to provide mentoring and transitional services for the reintegration and employment of non-violent offenders.

•Help individuals leaving prison obtain documents (birth certificates, Social Security cards) before reentry.

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