

PATTY MURRAY'S WASHINGTON VIEW

U.S. Senator Patty Murray's Weekly Report to the People of Washington March 28, 2003

FERC IGNORES NORTHWEST ENERGY MANIPULATION

For two years, I have called on the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) to investigate the 2001 West Coast energy crisis and to protect our state's consumers from outrageous rate gouging. On Wednesday, FERC announced that market manipulation had, in fact, taken place in the 2001 crisis.

Unfortunately, FERC also indicated that it is highly unlikely that Washington state ratepayers will be reimbursed for the harm caused by this illegal manipulation. I am dismayed by FERC's lack of action. FERC continues to both misunderstand the Pacific Northwest and ignore our interests.

At the height of the 2001 energy crisis, when companies like Enron and others were manipulating the system, FERC urged companies to enter into long-term contracts. Many utilities in the Pacific Northwest took this direction and entered long-term contracts at highly inflated rates. FERC's decision to ignore the impact of this manipulation is very disturbing.

It has taken FERC years to take action on the energy crisis of 2001. Such lack of urgency shows that FERC is incapable of regulating the market and protecting rate-payers.

Families and businesses in Washington were hit hard by skyrocketing wholesale rates. We lost jobs and businesses across the state, but FERC failed to step up to the plate and protect consumers. It is absurd that FERC should now seek to take authority away from state regulators through Standard Market Design and other proposals when the agency has already failed to protect Washington ratepayers.

AIRBUS PROTEST OF TANKER LEASE DISMISSED

In 2001, I helped usher legislation through Congress allowing the U.S. Air Force to lease four Boeing 737s and 100 Boeing 767s. However, in its continued attempts to weaken the U.S. aerospace industry, French aircraft builder, Airbus, protested the Boeing 737 lease, and tried to get the U.S. Air Force to purchase Airbus aircraft.

This week the General Accounting Office (GAO), the investigative arm of Congress, determined that the Airbus protest is "without merit" and the Boeing 737 lease will continue. The Air Force has already ordered two 737/C-40 Boeing aircraft, and has the option of leasing two more.

The law authorizing this lease was very specific and both the Air Force and Boeing followed the law. I am pleased that the GAO has ruled that the Airbus protest has no merit.

Although Airbus and its Congressional backers continue to seek avenues to equip the U.S. armed forces with French-built aircraft, I believe that the U.S. government and military should fly U.S. aircraft.

THE 2004 BUDGET

This week the Senate passed a 2004 budget, setting the spending priorities for the coming year. The Senate improved significantly upon what was originally proposed by increasing funding for education, transportation and health care, and making an irresponsible tax cut slightly more responsible.

At the end of the day, the Senate voted to cut in half the proposed \$700 billion tax cut. Many people have said that at a time of war, it is not fiscally responsible to push a large new tax cut for the wealthy.

The Senate also increased funding for federal highway and transit programs. These highway dollars will enable us to not only tackle some of the infrastructure problems in our transportation system, but will also create good-paying construction jobs that are so critical in this flagging economy.

I was proud to have sponsored the successful effort to increase education funding by \$2 billion to help schools comply under the No Child Left Behind law. The Senate also added funding for Pell Grants to help make college more affordable, and increased funds for workforce training.

I am disappointed that the new Senate majority rejected the effort to increase Washington state's Medicare reimbursement rates to ensure that seniors can continue to see their doctors under the Medicare program. Because of low reimbursement rates, seniors across our state are having an increasingly difficult time finding a doctor who will see them within the Medicare program. I will continue to work to pass my "MediFair" bill to help seniors and doctors in our state, and hope that other Members of Congress will join this important effort.

SUPPORTING OUR TROOPS

This week our American forces continued their operations in Iraq. We were reminded of the cost of war, with the loss of nearly two dozen brave Americans, and many more either missing or captured.

We honor those who died in the service of their country, and we pray that our POWs are treated humanely and returned quickly.

It is especially hard on the families and loved ones of our men and women in uniform. During this very difficult time, they are in our thoughts and prayers.

We are proud of our men and women in uniform, and grateful for their service. We pray for their safe and swift return.

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