

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Executive Session on Pending Legislation

Opening Remarks

June 22nd, 2022

[\[VIDEO\]](#) [\[AUDIO\]](#)

Senator Cantwell: Good morning everyone. The Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation will come to order. We're having an executive session today on a number of bills. The Commerce Committee will have issues critical to protecting consumers from skyrocketing costs of prescription drugs, investment in our maritime supply chain and workforce, and helping communities respond to extreme heat waves, ensure equal pay for U.S. athletes on the world stage, and reduce marine debris in our oceans. We will also be considering important nominees for the Department of Transportation and Commerce, the Metropolitan Washington Airport Authority as well as Coast Guard promotions.

Senator Grassley and I introduced Pharmacy Benefit Manager Transparency legislation to shine a brighter light on the drug pricing marketplace and to prevent unfair and deceptive practices by PBMs that drive up the cost of medications at the expense of consumers. Since 2014, prescription drug prices have gone up 35% while the cost of the goods and services jumped just 19%.

Take insulin for example, a drug that has been available for patients for over 100 years. Insulin price hikes have become a matter of life or death for many Americans with diabetes. Pharmacy Benefit Managers, [are] a middleman in the drug pricing supply chain. Today, three PBMS control 80% of the prescription drug market, operating out of the view of regulators and consumers. PBMs set prescription drug prices...determine whether drugs are covered by an insurance plan and pocket unknown sums of money that might otherwise be passed along... [as] savings to consumers.

During our subcommittee hearing, we learned how PBMs engaged in spread pricing, in which they reimburse pharmacists less than what they would charge insurance plans and keep the difference as profit. In some cases, the pharmacy is reimbursed below the drug purchase price forcing these small businesses to close.

Our legislation will make it clear that the FTC should use its authority to stop spread pricing, unfair claw backs and other deceptive practices. We've received letters from organizations representing millions of seniors, pharmacists and oncologists, biotech companies and consumers who've long called for increased transparency in today's PBM market.

Next, we will consider the Maritime Administration Reauthorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023. I want to thank Senator Wicker and their staff and my staff for their hard work. This bill would invest \$1.6 billion to make critical improvements in our maritime workforce, small shipyards, and port infrastructure that are key to keeping our supply chains moving. It will create a new maritime Innovation Center to explore cleaner fuels and maritime technology innovation to propel America's maritime industry into the future.

The bill would also strengthen protections against sexual assault and sexual harassment at sea and I'm glad we were able to work in a bipartisan fashion to send a strong signal that we must invest in and protect our maritime workforce, especially midshipmen at the start of their careers at sea.

Finally, it requires MARAD to develop a new maritime strategy to ensure that American maritime and US flag vessels are competitive on the global stage. We have a lot of work to do here, but we can see from our recent actions on the Federal Maritime Commission, that the United States needs to be more in the game. We need to make sure that we are planning and investing in our maritime of the future.

We also have the Preventing Heat Illness and Death Act of 2021. I want to thank our colleagues, Senator Markey, Sinema and Rosen. Senator Markey, thank you for leading on this important legislation. Every extreme heat event kills over 8,500 Americans more than any other weather disaster. Many states are being forced to respond to increasing numbers of extreme heat waves that just swept our nation in recent years. Last June in my state a three day heatwave with a temperature 30 degrees higher than normal killed 112 people. It is clear that we need to better prepare our communities to address the growing public health threat.

This bill would establish an interagency committee in the Office of Science and Technology Policy to develop and implement a federal strategy to reduce health risks and impact from extreme heat events. It would also authorize 7.5 million in federal assistance to improve response to extreme heat forecasts and protect our most vulnerable from growing threats of climate change. I urge my colleagues to support this important bill.

Next I'd like to thank the co-sponsors of Equal Pay for Team USA Act. Senators, Capito, Klobuchar and Lummis for working so diligently on this legislation. I can think of a no more appropriate way to pay tribute to the legacy of Title IX and all that is done for women and girls to participate in sports over the last 50 years than to pass this bipartisan bill on the eve of its 50th anniversary. The creative and common sense thinking that went into technical and policy changes we've made to this bill since introduction, are a real testament that this committee can do work together.

The bill we're voting on represents months of work with the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee advocates, and bipartisan colleagues to ensure that men and women competing internationally for team USA receive equal compensation, benefits, medical care, travel, and coverage expenses. The bill includes important oversight requirements. It also directs USOPC and sport's national governing bodies to work alongside athletes in pushing international sports federations that fail to provide equal support to male and female competitors to start writing this wrong. I want to thank Senator Johnson and Lee for their amendments, which I think make the bill even stronger.

The committee will also consider Save our Seas 2.0 Amendment sponsored by Senator Sullivan, Whitehouse, and Menendez. It is estimated that as much as 1.8 billion pieces of marine debris litter the shores of the continental United States and injures and kills marine and coastal wildlife, damage habitat, and hurts coastal communities that rely on fishing and a clean environment. In 2020, the Save Our Seas 2.0 Act, established the marine debris foundation to augment federal programs. Given the huge task and costs of cleaning up our oceans, it's important that we get this foundation working well and I support Senator Sullivan's amendments. I'd also like to thank Senator Sullivan and staff for working with us on amendments that ensure that foundation will engage properly with our tribal government.

Today, we will also consider several important nominees. We'll vote on Robin Hutchison to be the Administrator of the Motor Carrier Safety Administration. Strong federal leadership is needed as the nation faces a rise in highway fatalities including a dramatic increase in fatal crashes involving large trucks. Thankfully, Miss Hutchison knows the agency well. She currently serves as the Deputy Administrator and previously served as the Deputy Assistant Secretary for safety policy at DOT. She will also bring tremendous on the ground experience at the agency, having worked at public works for the City of Minneapolis and the Transportation Director for Salt Lake City.

And next we will consider Dr. Michael Morgan to be Assistant Secretary of Environmental Observation at NOAA. He's a longtime leader in the American Meteorological Society, and a professor at the Department of Atmospheric and Oceanic Sciences at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Dr. Morgan will leverage his significant experience to lead our nation's resiliency in extreme weather and realize the economic benefits from improved forecasting.

The committee will also consider the nomination of Sean Burton to serve on the board of the Metropolitan Washington Airports Authority which operate Dulles and Reagan airports. He is currently on the Los Angeles board of airport commissioners and serves as president. He will bring an important perspective to the authority and on important issues that I know everyone in this committee has a viewpoint about the services at those two airports.

So finally, we will vote on the promotion of Rear Admiral Miriam Lafferty to be the director of the Coast Guard Reserve. She brings extensive experience, achievements to the position. Will ensure that the Coast Guard Reserve is a responsive operational force ready to support our Coast Guard. I'll now turn to the ranking member for his statement.