

Grassley, McConnell, Landrieu & Lincoln offer contrasting views of healthcare bill

By Jon H. Harsch

© Copyright Agri-Pulse Communications, Inc.

Washington, Dec. 9 – At a packed press conference Wednesday, Senate Republicans flanked by U.S. Chamber of Commerce leaders from across the country blasted the Democrats’ proposed health reform legislation now being debated on the Senate floor.

Calling the bill “a job killer,” Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) charged that “the bill before us is going to increase taxes, going to take \$464 billion out of Medicare, it’s going to increase premiums and it’s not going to cut down on the cost of healthcare.” He was also sharply critical of proposals to expand Medicare coverage to include more people, quipping that “The last thing you want to think about when the Titanic is sinking is put Granma and more of your family on the boat, and this is really what this administration is trying to do.”

Asked about the latest healthcare compromises still being negotiated among Democrats, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) said “They’re busily behind closed



Sens. Chuck Grassley and Mitch McConnell. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

doors trying to figure out how to get to 60 votes.” He predicted that no matter what compromise the Democrats work out to win votes, “What isn’t going to change in this 2,000 page bill is half a trillion dollars in Medicare cuts, over \$400 billion in new taxes, higher insurance premiums for everybody else. That’s not going to change.”

McConnell charged that the Democrats’ legislative priorities and President Obama’s key initiatives “are in direct conflict with creating jobs and opportunities, so at the same time we’re having a [White

House] job summit to talk about creating jobs, they're trying to pass a job-killing healthcare bill, a job-killing cap-and-trade bill, with a runaway EPA administrator imposing heavy costs on the economy." McConnell concluded that "the best thing we could do to get this economy rolling again would be to stop these measures from becoming law."

Shortly after the GOP press conference, Sens. Mary Landrieu (D-LA), Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) and Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) held their own equally packed press conference to deliver a very different message. Landrieu acknowledged that the final shape of the bill remains uncertain because "until it's scored [by the Congressional Budget Office], we don't know."

Lincoln stressed that passing comprehensive healthcare legislation is particularly important to the small businesses which she said are "the engines of our local economy." She said small business owners "desperately want healthcare . . . They know that their productivity and their ability to be competitive is much better when they are able to get good, affordable healthcare for their employees."



Senators Debbie Stabenow, Mary Landrieu and Blanche Lincoln. Photo: Agri-Pulse.

Lincoln said she is working with other senators on amendments to improve the healthcare bill but that "the bill already provides approximately 3.9 million American small businesses with a tax credit to help offset the cost of offering health insurance coverage to their employees." She said that with small business owners struggling with tight credit and low profits, reform is vital because "healthcare cost increases have a serious impact on their businesses and their ability to grow their businesses." She explained that the tax credit would provide "immediate cost assistance to businesses that need help the most with rising healthcare costs." She said this help will allow small businesses to contribute to "putting our economy back on track and creating jobs."

Stabenow who played a key role in drafting the Democrats' health reform package said that "this legislation overall, in terms of coverage and creating more affordable insurance, is very much focused on small business, self-employed and on individuals looking for insurance." She said she's hopeful that the final bill will speed up the effective date of tax credits, to make them available in 2010 rather than 2011 as in the current bill.

Lincoln said the proposal to provide a national plan, available in every state with private insurance companies writing the health policies while the federal Office of Personnel Management (OPM) negotiates the terms, "takes the best of both worlds." She said with this approach, "Government creates an environment where private industry can operate but it creates the environment in a way that private industry is providing a product that best meets the needs of the consumer. . . that's what people want, they want choice, they want competition, and that competition comes from negotiation. I think that creates a great arena where we are going to see good quality healthcare offered at the most reasonable price."

Landrieu warned that without healthcare reform which both controls healthcare costs and spreads these costs over the nation as a whole, "we will not be able to create the jobs necessary to move the country forward."

For other *Agri-Pulse* news stories, go to: www.agri-pulse.com.

#30