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Wyden Statement at Finance Committee Markup of Health and Trade Nominations
As Prepared for Delivery

Today the Finance Committee will vote on three nominations to important roles in the administration. This is also our first meeting as a committee as the Congress gears up for a busy fall. More than eight million kids and their families in Oregon and around the country are counting on this committee to renew funding for CHIP before it expires at the end of the month. I want to thank Chairman Hatch for his bipartisan leadership of the committee with respect to CHIP, and I look forward to tomorrow's hearing on that subject.

Also on Finance Committee turf, there has been a lot of talk about the administration's big "pivot to tax reform," but there has been nothing in the way of outreach to this side of the aisle. My Democratic colleagues and I have shared our principles for tax reform with the majority. But Leader McConnell has made clear that he plans a go-it-alone, partisan process. That's a bad sign for anybody who wants tax reform to protect progressivity and put dollars back in middle class families' pockets. There's obviously going to be a lot of work ahead on that front as well.

Now on to this morning's business. Two of the three nominees on the docket today are up for positions at HHS. Mr. Robert Charrow is nominated to serve as general counsel, and Mr. Matthew Basset is nominated to serve as assistant secretary for legislation.

A major part of the jobs Mr. Bassett and Mr. Charrow are nominated to fill will be improving the department's dismal record of responding to oversight requests. The department's failure to answer basic questions and provide documents to members of this committee is approaching absurdity. Members on both sides have demanded improvement.

There are many examples of stonewalling I could share, but picking just one, I sent a letter to Secretary Price on February 17th seeking information about the decision to overhaul the healthcare.gov website during the early days of the administration. I'm still waiting for an adequate response.

There is no excuse for such long delays. The request was targeted and reasonably narrow, and it didn't cover information that's unavailable. In fact, the department is under court order to provide documents to an outside group that made a FOIA request about a similar subject. So from where I sit, it's a clear case of the Health and Human Services Department spending months ignoring a co-equal branch of government performing its constitutionally-mandated duties.

Today, I will vote to report these two nominees out of the committee, but I will withhold my support on the floor until the department demonstrates that it will be responsive to oversight requests.

Finally, Mr. Gilbert Kaplan is nominated to serve as the undersecretary for international trade at the Department of Commerce, which would put him at the top of the International Trade Administration.

Vigorous trade enforcement will be at the heart of Mr. Kaplan's job if he is confirmed. So far, however, this administration has not backed up its tough talk when it comes to enforcing our trade laws. A key example -- last week's announcement that the Commerce Department will delay levying tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber that is subsidized and dumped in the United States. It's an invitation for further harm to come to mill towns and workers in Oregon and nationwide. Obviously negotiations on a lasting solution should continue, but that doesn't mean the U.S. can quit enforcing the law in the meantime.

I appreciate Mr. Kaplan's commitment, in response to my question, to fully brief this committee on softwood lumber and expect him to take that commitment seriously. In my view, his background shows that he takes the right approach to strong trade enforcement, and that's sorely needed right now. I plan to support his nomination today.

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