



Senators Delay Health Care Reform

One of the most difficult issues facing most businesses today is how to provide affordable health care for our employees. This is not a new problem, nor is it one that has been kept secret. Many business organizations, such as the National Association of Manufacturers and the Chamber of Commerce, and many individual industry associations have been raising this issue for years. It is inconceivable that the U.S. Congress is unaware of this growing problem.

In fact, for the last 15 years, Congress has considered but failed to pass legislation that would help small and medium-sized businesses provide affordable health insurance for their employees. Despite speeches and announcements about how much they care about small business and support small businesses, when it comes to action, Congress has failed us on this one tool to help with the cost of health care.

This is only one example, but when repeated on enough issues, I think we see why the American public thinks the way it does about Congress. Recent headlines have taken the form of, "Public Disillusioned with Congress; Near Record Disapproval." Looking at several public opinion polls (see www.pollingreport.com for details), five recent surveys show that between 22 and 33 percent of Americans approved of the "job Congress is doing" and between 56 and 71 percent disapprove. The American public is angry with Congress.

Normally, I would not spend much time writing about Congress or the public's evaluation of Congress, but each new report shows less approval and respect for our nation's elected officials, so I thought it might be time to talk about how it is affecting the businesses involved in making and selling gears and related products.

According to a study by the Center on Policy Attitudes, "The public's dissatisfaction with the U.S. government was largely due to the perception that elected officials, acting in their self-interest, give priority to special interests and partisan agendas, over the interests of the public as a whole" and to the perception "that most of the decisions the government makes are not the decisions that the majority of Americans would make." (Details at www.policyattitudes.org/ems.htm.)

Why do we continue to elect a Congress that we consistently rate so poorly? The key, I believe, is that while as many as 70 percent of Americans disapprove of the job Congress is doing, more than 60 percent approve of their own representative. Our representatives proudly brag about how much federal money in grants and other programs they bring into the district, but few talk about how they helped facilitate the passage of a bill like the one that smaller businesses need to manage the cost of health insurance for their employees.

So where are we on the bill that would allow associations to offer coverage for their industry? For a number of years, the House and Senate have been working to pass a bill that would allow associations and other groups to create insurance groups for industries. Current law prevents industry groups from having an insurance program that crosses state lines. The proposed legislation would amend current law to allow nationwide programs.

The current House bill was passed in July 2005 and referred to the Senate. (For details go to www.thomas.loc.gov and enter the bill number HR 525 in the "Search Bill Text" box. Be sure to change the drop-down box from "text" to "bill number.")

The Senate, as it has every year since the bill was first introduced, found ways to delay and then effectively kill the bill. (Go to www.thomas.loc.gov, and search for S 1955.) On May 11, the Senate refused to allow the bill to be considered by the full Senate for debate and discussion.

Looking at the recorded vote, you will see that this vote had nothing to do with supporting business despite all of the rhetoric about how much each person voting "no" does support small business in this country. What you will see is that this was a party-line vote, 55 to 43. The bill needed 60 "yea" votes to move forward. With only 55 yeas, it has likely been killed for this Congress.

What can we do? In my view and in the view of most of us in business, the content of this bill goes



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well beyond party-line, partisan voting. Affordable or available health care insurance is not a political issue; it is a personal issue and a business issue that if not addressed will continue to cripple manufacturing.

I encourage you to write your Senator and explain how increasing options to get insurance could help your company and, more importantly, your employees and their families. Go to www.senate.gov, where at the top right-hand of the page you can find your Senators and their e-mail addresses.

The bill states that its purpose is "to expand health care access and reduce costs through the creation of small business health plans and through modernization of the health insurance marketplace, and for other purposes."

Once passed, the bill is not likely to be perfect, but it is a start, and many of our members need a better way to help employees and their families get and maintain health insurance.

Randy Kunkel's article on page 12 talks about "everyday leadership." For yourself and for our industry, I am asking you to practice some everyday leadership by writing your Senator and insisting that he or she do the same.

AGMA Calendar

June 27-28	Plastics Gearing Committee	Alexandria, Va.
June 28	Marine Enclosed Drive Committee	Chicago, Ill.
July 11-13	Computer Programming Committee	Minneapolis, Minn.
July 12-13	Powder Metallurgy Gearing Committee	Providence, R.I.
July 17	Board of Directors Orientation	Alexandria, Va.
July 17	Finance Committee	Alexandria, Va.
July 17	Executive Committee	Alexandria, Va.
July 18	Board of Directors	Alexandria, Va.
July 31-August 1	Cutting Tools Committee	Denver, Colo.
August 7-8	Trade Show Advisory Council	Detroit, Mich.
August 21-22	Technical Division Executive Committee	Milwaukee, Wis.
August 23-24	Metallurgy & Materials Committee	Milwaukee, Wis.
September 11-12	Aerospace Gearing	Big Sky, Mont.
September 11-15	AGMA Training School for Gear Manufacturing	Chicago, Ill.
September 18-19	Gear Failure Analysis Seminar	Big Sky, Mont.

R.P.

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