

Last year, I was proud to pass bipartisan, bicameral legislation to streamline the Presidential permit application process for bridges across the Rio Grande River in South Texas—four bridges: two in Laredo, one in Brownsville, one in Eagle Pass. And two of them are along the future I-27 route, the World Trade Bridge in Laredo, currently with 8 lanes—the proposal is to expand that to 18 lanes—and the Puerto Verde Bridge in Maverick County.

Passing the I-27 Numbering Act would support the increased trade we are expecting to come across those new bridges and those new lanes of traffic.

We have received letters of support for the I-27 Numbering Act from the Texas and New Mexico Departments of Transportation, the agencies tasked with building infrastructure along this route. We also have strong support from the Ports-to-Plains Alliance, which has worked so hard to bring the ports-to-plains route to reality. We have strong support from cities up and down the future Interstate 27.

Notably, the Texas Department of Transportation is working to improve infrastructure all along the future I-27. TxDOT currently has \$5.5 billion in active projects along the route related to planning, engineering, and construction, including \$481 million from the Texas Transportation Commission to upgrade parts of the route to a four-lane divided highway.

I want to thank Senator LUJÁN, who is presiding right now; Senator CORNYN, my colleague from Texas; and Senator HEINRICH, your colleague from New Mexico, for working hand in hand with me on this bill. It is notable that all four Senators representing Texas and New Mexico are standing in unison with this bill because it is good for Texas, it is good for New Mexico, and it is good for the country.

There should be no objection to this bill. The Senate previously passed this bill unanimously in July of last year. It then passed the House, which made some very small technical changes in December of last year. And there were no substantive changes to the bill, which means there should be no objections here now. The Senate should pass the I-27 Numbering Act today.

Before I proceed, I want to yield to my colleague from Texas, Senator CORNYN.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CORNYN. Mr. President, I want to thank Senator CRUZ for his leadership on this legislation, which I am, of course, proud to cosponsor. We represent a booming State. We represent in excess of 30 million people, and because of geopolitical shifts of manufacturing from China back to near shore or places like Mexico, thanks to the USMCA—the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement—we are mutually dependent with Mexico and Canada for trade, which creates millions of jobs right here in America, and principally in Texas.

The first time I went to Lubbock, TX, when I ran for statewide office, a former Congressman, Randy Neugebauer, before he was a Member of Congress, said: There are three things you need to remember about Lubbock, TX: cotton, Texas Tech University, and ports to plains. It was that important back then, and it is even more important today.

So the ports-to-plains system, as Senator CRUZ pointed out, is a 963-mile transportation corridor. And building on the success we had in passing a bill to designate the Ports-to-Plains Corridor in Texas and New Mexico as an interstate, this I-27 Numbering Act does exactly that.

I look forward to seeing the Ports-to-Plains Corridor fuel more trade, more jobs, more energy security, and agricultural production for years to come.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, as if in legislative session, I ask the Chair to lay before the Senate the message to accompany S. 992.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Chair lays before the Senate the following message from the House, which the clerk will report.

The legislative clerk read as follows:

Resolved, That the bill from the Senate (S. 992) entitled “An Act to amend the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 to designate the Texas and New Mexico portions of the future Interstate-designated segments of the Port-to-Plains Corridor as Interstate Route 27, and for other purposes.”, do pass with an amendment.

MOTION TO CONCUR

Mr. CRUZ. I move to concur in the House amendment, and I ask unanimous consent that the motion be agreed to and that the motion to reconsider be considered made and laid upon the table.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

Without objection, it is so ordered.

Mr. CRUZ. I yield the floor.

EXECUTIVE CALENDAR—Continued

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Texas.

TEXAS WILDFIRES

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, on Monday of this week, I visited the towns of Fritch and Borger in the Panhandle of Texas.

Fritch is a town of roughly 1,800 residents. They are no strangers to hard times. In 1992, a tornado a mile wide ripped through the town and destroyed over 1,300 homes. Ten years ago, in 2014, a wildfire in Fritch destroyed over 100 homes. In the past week and a half, Fritch and the rest of the Texas Panhandle, and the Oklahoma Panhandle as well, have been dealing with devastating wildfires.

When I was there on Monday, 242 homes had been lost. I met with local officials, county judges, mayors, the police chiefs, fire chiefs, volunteers at churches, and charities. I met with

families who have been devastated and lost everything.

I saw homes that had been burned beyond recognition. At one home I saw, outside was parked a truck that had been utterly burned and charred. The heat was so intense that the windshield glass had melted, and there were just pools of glass on the hood. I also saw, in front of a house, a motorcycle—I think it was a Harley—that had been utterly incinerated. The tires were burned and gone. I saw a boat—I think it was a bass boat, a fishing boat—again, utterly incinerated, nothing but fiberglass just melted on the ground.

One of the officials I met with was Volunteer Fire Chief Zeb Smith. I met with Chief Smith on Monday. Less than 24 hours after, Chief Smith passed away fighting that wildfire, running into a home that was on fire, trying to stop the blaze. He had been fighting fires for 9 days straight when he entered that home first thing Tuesday morning.

On Monday, I asked Chief Smith: Have any firefighters been injured yet? He said: “Thankfully, no.”

Neither he nor I knew when we were having that conversation that, 24 hours later, he would be first, and he would give his life to save his community.

These wildfires have been raging for a week and a half, and they devastated communities like Fritch all the way from Lake Meredith to Canadian. One of the fires, the Smokehouse Creek fire, is the largest wildfire in Texas history and the second largest in our Nation’s history. The scar from these fires can be seen from space, and they currently cover more acreage than the entire State of Rhode Island.

These fires have had a devastating impact on farmers and ranchers in Texas. More than 500 structures have been lost, and 10,000 miles’ worth of barbed wire has been destroyed. It is still unclear exactly how many cattle have perished, but we know it is thousands upon thousands of cattle that have been taken by the fire.

I texted a good friend of mine who lives in Canadian. I told her I was thinking of her and just asked how she was doing and how she was doing with the fires. I didn’t expect her response.

She responded: Well, not too well. My home burned down, so did my barn, and I lost half my cattle.

But then she responded: Do you know what? I am actually feeling pretty lucky because the ranchers on both sides of me lost all their cattle.

I have to say I prayed for my friend. I prayed for all the men and women in the panhandle. But that response also embodies the frontier spirit. These are tough Texans.

The destruction we are seeing is enormous. Throughout all of this, to date, there have been only three deaths attributed to the wildfires. That is extraordinary given the magnitude of this disaster as there could easily have been scores and scores of deaths. That is a testament to the firefighters and

the first responders in the panhandle who have been tirelessly working to get people out of harm's way and to contain the fires. At times, the fires have been traveling more than 200 yards per second. That is how fast these fires have been moving.

Right now, as this disaster is unfolding in Texas, the first priority is to contain these fires, to put them out. Texans are working to stop their spread. The weather has been a big factor. A few days ago, fortunately, there was some cold. There was some wet weather with snow and ice. That slowed the fires some, but then the weather got drier and windier, which are ideal conditions for spreading fire. So, right now, there are firefighters heroically battling massive fires, risking their lives.

When I was there, I was told that over 60 fire departments from across Texas and across the country have sent firefighters to battle the blaze. Monday night, I was at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, and I saw the Houston fire chief. He told me Houston had sent firefighters all the way up to the panhandle to help battle the blaze.

To anyone in the panhandle who sees this, I want to ask you: Please listen very, very carefully to your local officials. Listen to emergency responders. If they give you an evacuation order, treat it seriously. Keep your families safe. At the end of the day, it is tragic when someone loses a home, but a home can be replaced. Your family members cannot.

This fire is dangerous, and our first priority needs to be preserving life and getting people out of harm's way. The second step is to shift to relief and rebuilding, and rebuilding is a process that is going to take years. In the short term, there are charities that have stepped up and are engaged, including the Salvation Army and the Red Cross and their local churches.

You know, I want to say something. I have been in the Senate for 12 years. Texas is a big State, and as a big State, we have our share of natural disasters—from hurricanes ravaging the gulf coast, to tornadoes doing enormous devastation, to this wildfire raging in the panhandle right now. As Texas's Senator, it is my responsibility to stand with those communities in a time of crisis and in the aftermath rebuilding.

Every time we have had a natural disaster in Texas, it is heartbreaking when you see the loss of life and the suffering, but, consistently, it is also inspiring. It is inspiring because of the reaction of Texans in a time of crisis. They come together, Texans helping Texans, holding on to each other, supporting each other.

When Hurricane Harvey hit the gulf coast and home after home was flooded, I remember Texans would go and rescue their neighbors. They were jumping on bass boats because the streets were flooded, and they would go from house to house, pulling people out

of harm's way. Rednecks in bass boats is what I called them, and it was the spirit of Texas. The beauty in that time is there are no partisan divisions. There are no Republicans and Democrats. People don't care about race or ethnicity or religion. It is just Texans helping Texans. That is what I saw in Fritch and Borger, that same spirit of Texans helping Texans.

I will tell you, in a time of crisis, the church steps up, and the church should. The church should show love.

When I was in the panhandle, I stopped at multiple churches and relief centers. I thanked the volunteers who were there. They were giving out food. They were giving out water. They were giving out diapers. They were giving out supplies for people who had lost everything, and I thanked them.

I visited with one woman whose home had burned down, and her daughter's home had burned down. Yet, I will tell you, she was smiling and was in good spirits.

She said: Do you know what? My family is alive and safe.

I mentioned that, in Fritch, 242 homes had burned down. The county judge told me, though, there were only half a dozen people in the local shelter they had stood up because everyone else whose home had burned down was presumably staying with friends or family or loved ones. It was other Texans who said: Hey, you lost your home; come stay with me. That is inspiring. It is powerful. That is what Texans do.

There are also things we can and should do at the Federal level to help the panhandle. With every local official, I assured: Do you have the Federal resources you need? Do you have the assistance right now in crisis?

Then, going forward, my office has been working hand in hand with State officials and local officials and is beginning to coordinate Federal resources to fight the fires. Indeed, I have already filed an amendment to the minibudget the Senate is considering right now to increase the funding for wildfire relief to help the people impacted by this. I will continue working on measures to provide disaster relief for Texans in harm's way—from the people who have lost their homes to our ranchers who have suffered the devastating loss of livestock. We need to stand with the panhandle and help recover from this historic disaster.

There is an old panhandle saying up there that people have "Panhandle Spirit"—a spirit of humility; a spirit of companionship; a spirit that when a neighbor needs help, by God, you help him. The whole country has seen that spirit in the past few days. Thousands of bales of hay and cattle feed have been trucked up daily from ranchers wanting to help out fellow ranchers. Hundreds of pallets of water and food and clothes have been donated to help people in need.

That same spirit that built Texas is the same spirit that makes the Lone Star State so unique. That is the spirit

that keeps our firefighters fighting the blazes, that keeps our ranchers rebuilding the fences and people picking up the pieces and rerooting in the land they love.

Together, with that same spirit and that same determination that people in the Panhandle Plains have had for generations, we will rebuild. We will come back even stronger than ever.

God bless our firefighters, and God bless our first responders. God bless all the Texans who have lost their homes in the past few days and those Texans who have lost loved ones. We are praying for you, and we will help you rebuild.

I would like to close by again talking about Chief Smith.

The loss of Zeb Smith has left a huge hole in the community. On social media, the Fritch Volunteer Fire Department wrote:

Just know that right now we are not OK. We love our chief, our brother, our friend. Please be patient with us.

The Hutchinson County Office of Emergency Management team stated about Chief Smith:

His exemplary leadership was evident in his tireless efforts over the past week, where he worked diligently to protect and safeguard his community and fellow citizens.

Chief Smith was a hero. His name will not be forgotten. In his honor, I had a flag flown over the U.S. Capitol to recognize his heroic service. Chief Smith gave his life on Tuesday of this week so that his fellow Texans could live.

To the family and friends and loved ones of Chief Smith, we are mourning with you, and we are celebrating a life well lived.

May God bless the people of Texas. We will defeat these wildfires.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from New Mexico.

RADIATION EXPOSURE COMPENSATION ACT

Mr. HEINRICH. Mr. President, nearly 80 years ago, in Central New Mexico's Tularosa Basin, at a place we now call the Trinity Site, the world as we knew it changed.

The Trinity test was the first detonation of a nuclear weapon in human history, and the families who lived downwind from the Trinity explosion have lived the consequences of that day for every moment of their lives. These families were never told that the white dust falling around them that day would contaminate their bodies, would contaminate the bodies of the children they had yet to bear, that it would contaminate the crops and the water and the livestock that they had built their communities around. They were never told about the kinds of cancers they would get, the conditions they would suffer through, or the loved ones they would lose.

These families still to this day have not received the recognition or the compensation for what they endured so that our Nation could be victorious in the Second World War. Nearly a century later, 80 years now, these folks deserve better. They deserve justice.