

Fighting Gas Prices

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Over the past several weeks I've received a batch of irate telephone calls related to surging gas prices. It's a problem that affects all of us, and I share in the frustration of each and every caller.

Washington is an interesting city. There's a lot of power concentrated here and we're able to have an impact on lots of issues that face the country. But this is also a city divided, a city where the president often stands against many of the solutions that could be implemented.

There is no simple answer to the problem of high gas prices, which seem to be climbing a few cents every week. But there are options open to us, and Congress is working to enact as many of those solutions as we can.

You may have seen in the news that the House and Senate both voted to temporarily suspend the filling of the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, and the president signed that bill. The reserve, the nation's emergency supply of crude oil, is already at 97 percent capacity, and suspending shipments until December won't hurt the nation one bit. On the contrary, experts predict that halting the government's stockpiling may temporarily lower gas prices.

But here's the catch to that story: Both chambers of Congress had to spend time debating and voting on this measure because President Bush repeatedly ignored calls from both parties to suspend shipments on his own. He had the power to do so, but he put the interests of the oil companies ahead of the interest of consumers.

Even Democrats acknowledge that suspending shipments will have only limited affect. Experts say it could lower gas prices by 5 to 24 cents per gallon. But at least it's a start. It's too bad that it took an act of Congress to push the president to take this common sense step.

That's not the only action Congress is taking. The House of Representatives passed legislation to investigate price gouging, when retailers use the cover of high prices to unfairly inflate their rates even further. We also took action to hold the OPEC monopoly accountable for price fixing, unfairly driving up the cost of crude oil. A new piece of legislation would allow the United States to prosecute OPEC-controlled entities for collusion under federal anti-trust law.

We also gave the Federal Trade Commission new authority to crack down on those manipulating wholesale energy markets to keep prices high, and we spurred the Federal Trade Commission to investigate market manipulation. The Democratic Congress also passed a landmark energy bill that invests in alternative fuels. It's a long-term solution, but if it moves, the average car will reach a new standard of 35 miles per gallon. In one year alone, that will save Americans \$22 billion at the pump.

So what about those oil companies and their windfalls? They're piling up record profits worth many billions of dollars-billions of taxpayer dollars in the form of subsidies. Democrats are working to repeal those subsidies and invest the savings in renewable and alternative energy.

So this discussion of congressional solutions begs the question: What is President Bush proposing? He has precisely one solution: Drill for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Oddly enough, this is the same solution he offered seven years ago, and he knows the country does not approve of this solution. But at least the president has been consistent: Drill in the Arctic Refuge and veto everything else.

It's too bad the leader of our country has limited his options so severely, only considering actions that would direct more money to oil companies. Drilling in ANWR would definitely do that, offering oil companies plenty of new access to taxpayer-owned lands. But experts say that would only save drivers a penny a gallon, and even those paltry savings won't show up for more than 20 years.

So to all of those who have called me or written to my office, Congress is not sitting still. My colleagues and I are taking a stand against the president's reluctance to lower oil prices. We're taking aggressive steps to confront this problem. The president may be willing to hold firm until his term runs out, but that's not good enough for me and it's definitely not good enough for our country.

