

Statement of Congressman George W. Gekas

Before the House Budget Committee

March 8, 2001

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee, thank you very much for allowing me to testify at this important hearing. I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you and once again bring to your attention a matter of great concern to many and an issue that is near and dear to my heart: preventing government shutdowns.

As you may be aware, I have been introducing legislation to prevent government shutdowns since 1988. My current legislative effort, H.R. 29, the Government Shutdown Prevention Act, does the same thing as its predecessor bills: it removes the threat of the government shutting down due to an impasse in budget negotiations by providing for an automatic continuing resolution, at the previous year's spending level, if an Appropriations bill has not been passed.

Under the language of this bill no new programs can be proposed, no old, terminated or unfunded programs can be resumed, reborn or refunded. Those determinations are to be made by the committee, not my bill. The language of my bill is preventative, not curative: it seeks to prevent problems which could arise from a government shutdown but does not cure

any underlying problems with that budget.

The threat of a government shutdown is very real. Since 1977 the government has been shut down seventeen times, costing the U.S. taxpayer over \$1 billion. Since my own election to the House in 1982 I have witnessed eight government shutdowns.

This issue has resonated very strongly with our colleagues. Past supporters of this legislation included Chairman Nussle, former Chairman Kasich, Reps. Gutknecht, Klezcka and Toomey. It has also been endorsed by such organizations as the Concord Coalition Citizens Council, U.S. Chamber of Congress, Americans for Tax Reform, Citizens Against Government Waste, The Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, and the National Taxpayers Union among others.

Unfortunately, the last Administration was opposed to an automatic continuing resolution and vetoed a bill which contained this provision. But now we have an Administration which supports it. OMB Director Mitch Daniels has stated, "I believe a measure of this kind is needed to ensure that the continued operations of government programs are not threatened by political disputes." We now have a real opportunity to enact this "good government" provision.

This legislation has been criticized - unfairly, I believe - as an attack on the Appropriations Committee and an attempt to usurp their power. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. This bill would give the Appropriations Committee the extra time that it needs to work out the wide-range of budgetary issues that confront them at the end of every Session.

It is also argued that implementing this kind of provision would take away the incentives for us to get our spending bills done on time. I strongly disagree. For nineteen out of the last twenty years, Congress and the President have not finished the budget process by the October 1st deadline. This past year only two of the thirteen spending bills were finished on time. As a result, Congress had to pass twenty-one separate continuing resolutions to prevent the government from shutting down. This provision will not remove any incentives, but will rather act as a “safety-net” while eliminating the need for awkward and partisan debates over passage of continuing resolutions.

Furthermore, enactment of an automatic continuing resolution is not some sort of grand experiment. The State of Wisconsin has taken this good-government approach to budgeting, and it has worked well. It has not diminished the power of the appropriators and it has not reduced the pressure to reach agreement on state budget funding levels. An automatic

continuing resolution has been proven effective and workable at the state level and it can be effective and workable at the federal level.

This provision is a good-government, pro-taxpayer idea. It is simply wrong to shut down the government. It is also wrong to use the threat of a government shutdown for the advancement of a political agenda. This is something that we should be committed to making off limits. We need to assure the taxpayers that regardless of the disagreements and battles that occur in Washington, they can always count on the government to be operating and providing its proper services. This is the people's government. As such, we have no right to shut down the government or use the threat of a government shutdown to advance our political agenda. The shutdowns of the past have shaken America's faith in government. It is within our power to send a clear message to the American people that there will be no chance of them ever being a victim of our inability to come to a consensus on our budget priorities.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank you for your past support and I ask that the Budget Committee once again consider this modest, but important, reform.

Thank you for your time and indulgence.