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New Bill Extends Benefits for Jobless

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He was well-known for playing professional baseball at one time, but Senator Jim Bunning of Kentucky earned headlines for a different reason this past week as he single-handedly held up a vote in the U.S. Senate that would pass a new bill extending the expiration deadline for federal unemployment benefits and COBRA health care subsidies. After being passed by the U.S. House last week, the bill, known as the Temporary Extension Act of 2010 (H.R. 4691), was delayed for five days in the U.S. Senate due to Bunning's filibuster, but was finally passed by the Senate on Tuesday, March 2, 2010 with a vote of 78-19. President Obama signed the new bill late Tuesday.

The bill is a \$10 billion measure to temporarily extend federal unemployment benefits and other federal programs. Federal unemployment compensation, which generally kicks in after the state-funded 26 weeks of coverage expire, was extended through April 5, 2010. Without this bill, many jobless people would not have been able to apply for federal unemployment benefits after February 2010, and the National Unemployment Law Project estimates that 1 million people would have been affected in March. The bill also extends the deadline so that workers who are involuntarily terminated through March 31, 2010 are eligible for a 65 percent federal subsidy for COBRA premiums. The eligibility deadline for these COBRA subsidies had been set to expire at the end of February 2010.

Other measures included in the new bill include the extension of several other programs, such as the Small Business Loan Guarantee Program, National Flood Insurance Program and Highway Trust Fund, which pays for transportation projects nationwide. The bill also appropriates an additional \$60 million for the Small Business Loan Guarantee Program.

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