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**BAUCUS PRAISES YEAR-END MEASURES TO BRIDGE GAP
IN EMERGENCY UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS,
HEALTH CARE FOR OUT-OF-WORK AMERICANS
AND FUNDING FOR SAFE INFRASTRUCTURE, HIGHWAY JOBS**

Finance Package includes Protection for Medicare Physician Payments, U.S. Families in Poverty

Washington, DC – Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-Mont.) applauded Senate action today on a package of Finance Committee measures critical to U.S. jobs, highways and economic recovery. The Finance package, included as part of end-of-year defense appropriations legislation, includes two-month extensions of emergency unemployment insurance and eligibility for unemployment health benefits under the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act, or COBRA, as well as a two-month extension of federal highway funding to ensure important repairs to U.S. roads and bridges continue.

Other measures in the Finance package include a provision to reverse planned cuts in physician payments under Medicare so doctors do not suffer a reduction in payments for their services, and to keep those services available to seniors and military personnel. Without today's action, Medicare and Tricare providers would have seen a 21 percent cut in their payments. There is also a provision to protect access for low-income American families to important programs such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or food stamps, Medicaid and home heating assistance. The measure prevents a reduction in the federal poverty level (FPL) due to economic deflation resulting from the recession, so that low-income families may continue to qualify.

“Millions of jobless Americans struggle daily and even folks with jobs are seeing their paychecks stretched. Today, we took action on careful policy for the protection of our citizens seeking jobs,” Baucus said. **“We also took an important step to prevent steep, unfair cuts in payments to our physicians in Medicare as we work to fix the flawed Sustainable Growth Rate formula once and for all. Overburdened families do not deserve any added hardship in this recession, so we made sure they remain eligible for programs to help get them through these difficult times. Working together, we are going to move this economy in the right direction.”**

Extension of the underlying Recovery Act emergency unemployment insurance provisions is expected to protect roughly two million out-of-work Americans. The package also includes a two-month extension of eligibility for the tax credit for purchase of COBRA health insurance benefits. Additionally, those eligible for the credit will be able to receive an extra six months of the credit.

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Senator Baucus recently worked with colleagues to extend unemployment benefits in all 50 states by 14 weeks and for six additional weeks in states with unemployment levels over 8.5 percent. The legislation rescued nearly two million unemployed workers who were set to exhaust current emergency benefits by December 31, 2009.

Today's legislation also includes a two-month highway funding extension to prevent shutdown of the Federal Highway Administration and construction projects across the nation.

"We also extended vital funding for the maintenance and repair of our roads and bridges, which saves hundreds of thousands of American highway jobs," continued Baucus. **"This two-month extension is essential, but it is not enough. We need to give states the assurance of adequate funding throughout the year and are committed to working toward comprehensive reauthorization of this legislation to modernize our transportation infrastructure for safe and efficient roadways."**

Senator Baucus has also recently successfully fought to replenish the Highway Trust Fund amid declining fuel tax receipts. In September 2008, he was successful in advancing an \$8 billion Highway Trust Fund fix, and more recently offered a strong longer-term solution that would restore the Fund's ability to earn interest on its balance and reimburse the Fund for lost interest earnings and emergency spending.

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