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## **Crapo: 'Rushed' health reform is anything but** *Finance panel's work is near end of process, not beginning*

It may seem like Congress is rushing the debate on health care reform, but Sen. Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, said the work being done now is the culmination of several years of effort.

"We've been working on this nearly four years now," said Crapo, a member of the Senate Finance Committee, during a telephone interview Thursday. "Just in the last two years, we've had dozens and dozens of hearings and forums on specific pieces of this bill."

Senate Finance is the last of five congressional committees to complete its work on health care reform. Two competing bills are awaiting action in the House and Senate. The finance committee began "marking up" or amending its reform proposal last week. "This isn't a hearing," Crapo said. "Mark-up is a time when all the activity is between committee members."

There are 10 Republicans and 13 Democrats on the committee, including Washington Sen. Maria Cantwell, who could not be reached for comment on short notice. Crapo said things usually get going around 9 or 10 a.m. The respective party members usually meet in caucus prior to that, to discuss what's on tap for the day. Then the committee begins wading through some of the 500 or so amendments to the initial bill.

"That's not an unusual number, particularly when the issue is as big as this," he said. "It isn't unusual to see most of them fall away, meaning they won't even get brought up. A senator might file five different amendments on the same issue and then decide which one to use. This is our seventh full day in mark-up, and the total number of amendments we've handled so far is about 80 to 100."

The amendments are typically grouped by topic, he said, which helps everyone follow the process. Opportunities to present amendments usually rotates between parties, with a Republican followed by a Democrat. Each senator describes his or her proposal and talks about why the others should support it. Depending on the level of interest, the debate may only take a few minutes, or several hours. "If it's something like Sen. Rockefeller's amendment allowing a government (health insurance) option, that debate took more than five hours," Crapo said.

Besides the committee members, Crapo said, the media is well-represented at the mark-up session. It's open to the general public as well, and there are about 50 or 60 staff members in the room. They work for the committee or for individual senators. During breaks, senators still have floor votes to cast, or they may have other committee meetings. The finance committee sessions have been wrapping up around 11 p.m.

"For the most part, we've been able to maintain proper decorum, but tempers are clearly frayed," Crapo said. "It's been a very contentious debate that has resulted in mostly party-line votes. The bottom line is, we continue to be embroiled in a discussion whether to nationalize health insurance and whether to have an expensive, government-regulated health delivery system. We can't get past that to address the questions I think we should address, which is how to drive down costs, maintain access and improve quality. I'm discouraged by that." The committee could finish its work by today, he said. That would allow the full Senate to take up the measure later this month.