

AG ISSUES UPDATE
Edited by Brad Hollabaugh
September, 2013

FDA Pushes Back Comment Deadline on New Food Safety Regulations

The federal Food and Drug Administration has extended the deadline for two parts of comprehensive revisions of food safety regulations. FDA officials are giving producers and agriculture organizations until Nov. 26 to submit comments on two specific components of the regulations.

FDA officials have proposed an overhaul of food safety standards for both growers and processors to reduce the number of food borne illnesses tied to fruit and vegetables. The standards will cover the handling and harvest of fresh foods and certain farming practices like manure application.

During a session held at Ag Progress Days, the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture took comments from agriculture organizations about their concerns with the regulations, including required testing of agriculture water and the financial impacts new rules could have on farmers.

Farm Bill Set to Expire As Congress Returns to Work

Congress has less than a month left before the current Farm Bill expires. However, unlike late last year, federal lawmakers are not facing the same market upheaval that would have resulted from inaction.

At the end of December, Congress decided to extend the 2008 Farm Bill to September 30. Failing to act on a bill would have caused the nation's agriculture policy to revert back to World War II era price supports, a move many suspected would have caused market turmoil. So will the same thing happen if Congress does not pass the Farm Bill by October 1? Not quite. Many agriculture programs, like dairy pricing and crop insurance, will continue through the end of the year.

The Farm Bill is facing a crowded Congressional calendar as lawmakers return to session this month. Congress is facing no less than 12 appropriations bills to keep the government running—and not one of them has passed. The debt ceiling, sequestration, and competing priorities are all demanding the attention of Congress.

The Senate passed a Farm Bill that contains both agriculture policy and nutrition spending. Just before their break, the House passed a Farm Bill that focused only on agriculture policy. The bills were largely similar concerning agriculture policy, but the huge difference between the two versions is the elimination of the nutrition policies on the House side.

Both the House and Senate are expected to appoint members to a conference committee to hammer out the differences between both bills. The challenge for the committee will be to come to a compromise that the majority of lawmakers in both chambers can support. The obvious difference in the philosophical approach to the Farm Bill from each Chamber presents quite a challenge. Since compromise has not been a landmark for this Congress, it remains to be seen where the final version will land.

Immigration Reform . . . Still Stalling

With the summer vacation ending, Immigration Reform remains an unresolved topic for the country. Although many Agricultural organizations were hopeful that Congress would have acted prior to the summer break, it now appears that the topic will be added to the huge load facing Congress in September.

Given the House's position that they would not tackle Immigration Reform policy in a comprehensive manner, it remains to be seen which aspect of the nation's policy will be addressed first. And gauging

from the multiple fiscal issues facing Congress upon their return to Washington, Immigration Reform may not take an immediate priority.

USDA Hears Comments on Value Added Products and Regulations

Officials from the U.S. Department of Agriculture attended an event held during Ag Progress Days, hosted by Penn State and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, on the issues of value added products and government regulations. Agriculture organizations were asked to comment on how both issues are impacting producers. They agree that there are a number of opportunities for Pennsylvania farmers to include more value-added products in their operations.

Representatives of agriculture organizations said labor is a chief concern among different segments in the industry, and it can prevent farmers from expanding. Among the concerns also relayed to USDA: the lack of federal funding for specialty projects and poor port infrastructure in Philadelphia that is hampering overseas trade. Agriculture organizations encouraged the USDA to explore public-private partnerships for new funding sources for producers and develop marketing and production guidelines so producers can better utilize high tunnels for year-round usage.

New Pesticide Label Emphasizes the Protection of Pollinators

The Environmental Protection Agency will require new labeling requirements on certain pesticides in order to protect important pollinator species. Bee hives have been dying off or disappearing due to causes still under investigation.

Known as Colony Collapse Disorder, beekeepers have been noticing significant declines in populations during the winter months. Research done by the U.S. Department of Agriculture points to a number of factors, including the use of pesticides, as potential causes for Colony Collapse Disorder. The new labeling will emphasize avoidance of pesticide applications during times of bee activity on flowering crops and avoidance of drift into areas of pollination activity.

Other causes beside pesticides may be responsible for bee colony disappearance including mite infestations on individual bees coupled with the introduction of diseases, loss of habitat and poor nutrition.

Thompson Introduces Legislation to Address Education Funding

U.S. Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson has introduced legislation that would reform the formula used for grant funding under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. The current formula puts lower populated schools at a disadvantage, even if the district has a higher concentration of poverty, said Thompson, R-Centre County.

The bill is co-sponsored by Rep. Louise Slaughter, a Democrat from New York. "This bipartisan bill we have introduced is a level headed and equitable approach to curbing this discriminatory flaw," Thompson said.

Title I is the largest source of federal education assistance. School districts with high percentages of children from low-income families use the grant funding to create programs aimed at increasing student achievement. Changes sought by Thompson's bill would alter the current funding formula to put less emphasis on a school district population and instead focus on poverty concentration.

New Initiative Launched to Answer Questions on Genetically Modified Organisms

Agricultural biotechnology companies engaged in developing genetically modified seeds have launched a new initiative to reach out to the public looking for answers about genetically modified organisms. The

new site, www.GMOAnswers.com is an interactive website where visitors can look at common questions surrounding the use of GMOs in crops.

The site aims to make GMO information, research and data easily accessible to the public, and also support farmers, regardless of the types of crops they grow. The site is also designed to be part of the ongoing conversation over the use of GMO crops.

GMOAnswers was created by several seed and biotechnology companies. In 2013, 93 percent of the soybean acreage planted in the United States and 85 percent of the corn contained some type of genetic modification.

USAPPLE - Change in Leadership

Nancy Foster, President & CEO of U.S. Apple Association, has resigned her position as of September 1, 2013. Diane Kurrle, Vice President of Public Affairs, is acting as administrative overseer until a new chief administrator is hired.

Foster made the following statements in the August 9, 2013 issue of the *USApple Weekly Report*, "The apple industry has thrived during the 11 years I've been privileged to lead the association. With a return to profitability, the next generation has come back to their family businesses. Demand is good and returns are positive. Long-term investment is positioning the industry for a strong future as long as consumption keeps up with growing production.

"USApple is a political voice to be reckoned with in Washington, D.C. Our consumer education program is at new heights with exciting apple health discoveries and it reaches over 300 million customers a year. USApple will continue to manage media crises to defend your market. It will also provide valuable industry information and advocate with regulatory agencies on your behalf. You have a skilled and dedicated staff of professionals who I respect and admire.

"Looking ahead, I hope that the apple industry can stand together for the benefit of all, both large and small. To be an impact player takes hard work, a commitment to excellence and a passion to win. I know that by working together with a focused agenda, USApple will continue to be a formidable force."

Penn State and PDA Start Joint Research Centers

Penn State and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture are using state funding to start three new resource centers aimed at addressing several critical agriculture issues. The collaborative effort will utilize staffing to address food safety, animal care and plant health. Funding for the centers came through a \$300,000 appropriation in the latest state budget.

"We are thrilled the legislature provided \$300,000 in seed money to assist in getting the Resource Centers established," said Mary Wirth, college spokeswoman. "We are optimistic that the long term value of the centers becomes evident as they become fully functional and continued funding will be accessible to support this collaborative, innovative approach to address high priority agricultural issues."

The centers will be housed at Penn State. Staff from both the university and PDA to develop solutions for those three areas. Research will be used by the agriculture industry, and the public, address those areas of critical concern.

For instance, in the areas of food safety, research done by the center could guide PDA's efforts in helping the industry, and producers, comply with new standards, Wirth said. The research center concept was born out of previous budget hearings, where state lawmakers encouraged PDA and Penn State to forge

ahead with joint partnerships, Wirth said. While PDA and Penn State already enjoy a close working relationship, the research centers are a first-of-its kind effort by both organizations.

According to Penn State, the centers will address the following issues:

- Food Safety Resource Center will examine changes brought by the federal Food Safety and Modernization Act, and how it will impact producers, processors and retailers. The center can focus its efforts on training the industry to comply with new standards.
- Animal Care Resource Center will look at science-based best practices for animal care, housing, transportation and employee training.
- Plant Health Resource Center will address the challenge presented by non-native invasive species, such as the stink bug, that are threatening crops. Researchers will also look at monitoring and surveillance practices to prevent pests from causing widespread problems.

More Bridges Face Weight Restrictions as Lawmakers Debate Transportation Funding

The Pennsylvania Department of Transportation has placed weight restrictions on around 1,000 bridges, a move that could cause a number of headaches for farmers. The new weight restrictions on structurally deficient bridges is needed because of legislative inaction on finding more sources of funding for highway infrastructure, PennDOT officials said. Weight restrictions will help slow the deterioration of bridges, the department said.

"For months I've been explaining to Pennsylvanians and to lawmakers that there are very real consequences to not enacting a transportation funding plan," said PennDOT Secretary Barry Schoch. "Without additional revenues anticipated in the future, I have to make the safe and responsible decision to reduce how much weight is crossing these deteriorating bridges."

The move may prove detrimental to farmers, who rely on bridges to move their product to market, or receive needed supplies on their operations. Before they left for summer break, members of the General Assembly were unable to come to agreement on new sources of highway funding. The Senate has adopted a bill that would increase fees and uncap the Oil Company Franchise Tax to generate new money for highway infrastructure. House members are considering a more scaled back plan.

Pennsylvania has the highest number of structurally deficient bridges in the nation. The state also has the second highest amount of streams in the nation, one of the oldest systems and a tough freeze/thaw cycle. Each factor is playing a significant role in the state's bridge problem, Schoch said.

PennDOT's move on weight restrictions will affect 530-state owned bridges and around 470 locally-owned bridges. PennDOT had been holding off on posting new weight restrictions to see if additional funding would allow repairs to be scheduled, Schoch said. "We have a serious funding need and the legislature still has not acted to pass a comprehensive transportation plan. I have to look ahead to the future and preserve these bridges because, without action, we will not have money to invest in them for a long time," he said.

To see a list of the bridges with weight restrictions, visit PennDOT's website at www.dot.state.pa.us and click on the link for Bridge Information.

Better Participation Urged for Crop Insurance

Pennsylvania has made strides to increase the amount of farmers in the state utilizing crop insurance as part of their risk management tools. However, the level of participation in Pennsylvania lags behind

neighboring states, said Gene Gantz, a crop insurance expert with the Risk Management Agency. Gantz delivered his comments at a crop insurance conference at Ag Progress Days.

Last year, about 47 percent of the acreage in Pennsylvania was covered by some type of crop insurance program, Gantz said. That is a significant amount of growth in the past 20 years, he said. However, states like Maryland enjoy a 70 percent enrollment rate, giving Pennsylvania a goal to strive towards, Gantz said. Gantz told crop insurance agents at the conference to take a fresh look at their marketing approach.

Lawmakers Hold Hearing on Scrap Metal Theft

Members of the state House Consumer Affairs Committee met recently to address the problem of scrap metal theft. House lawmakers are considering several bills that would place restrictions on the sale of scrap metal, including a 48-hour waiting period for cash transactions and increasing penalties for facility operators. Current proposals before lawmakers would provide for better tracking of transactions, including the date and time of sale and an itemized description of what was sold.

Specialty Crop Tour Planned

Penn State is organizing a specialty crop tour in Adams County with a visit to Rice Fruit Company and Knouse Foods. The tour, scheduled for 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Nov. 12, is hosted in part by the Young Grower Alliance. Participants will be able to tour both companies, located near Gardners.

Rice Fruit Company is the largest fresh apple packing facility on the East Coast, processing more than 1 million bushels of apples and peaches each year. Knouse Foods, a grower-owned cooperative, processes apple sauce, juice and pie fillings at six processing plants in two states.

Sign up by Nov. 8 by contacting: Catherine Lara cyl1@psu.edu, or 717-334-6271, ext. 315