

AG ISSUES UPDATE
Edited by Brad Hollabaugh
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Farm Bill Solution Still Undecided

As of early December, Congress continues to focus on the budget and no progress has been made on the Farm Bill. It is expected that – at minimum – they will pass an extension of at least parts of the 2008 Farm Bill before the end of the year. Otherwise the impact will begin to be felt by farmers and consumers alike with milk prices estimated to rise to over \$10 per gallon.

It is still possible that a new, five-year bill could be included in a larger budget deal. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) continues to hold out for a new bill, saying she will not support an extension. If an extension is passed, the new Congress will be charged with writing a new Farm Bill.

Both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees will have some new members. During the first week of December, House Agriculture Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.) announced that seven Republican members would be joining the Committee including Michigan Rep. Dan Benishek (R) and Freshman Chris Collins (R) of New York.

The Democrats will announce their Committee roster in January. In the Senate, no announcements have been made by the Democrats or Republicans but at least three new Members will be joining the Committee to replace outgoing Senators Ben Nelson (D-Neb.), Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.)

Immigration Reform May Move Forward

Supposedly, A bipartisan working group to negotiate amnesty legislation has formed behind closed doors in both the Senate and House. This news comes with President Obama's renewed emphasis on passing comprehensive immigration reform early in his second term.

His plan would seek a conditional path to citizenship for the nearly 11 million illegal aliens estimated to be in the country, provide strong border security, increase penalties for employers who hire illegal immigrants, and make it easier to bring in foreign workers under special visas, among other elements. Strategists suggest that there is only a brief window of opportunity for legislators to vote on a comprehensive bill before turning their attention to the next election cycle.

Fortunately, USApple is an active member of a DC-based coalition including the American Farm Bureau Federation working to develop a consensus on a new agricultural labor proposal. New legislation must address both the current workforce and make significant guestworker reforms. The group is working to complete work on a proposal in time for introduction in January.

The American Farm Bureau Federation labor reform proposals suggest a program that would allow agriculture businesses, including farmers and processors, to register with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Employers would be allowed, but not required, to offer employees a contract, which the employees could accept or decline. A worker who declines the contract would be an “at will” employee with a visa that is portable among employers registered with the USDA. At-will employees’ visas would provide work authorization for up to 11 months.

A contracted worker’s visa could last up to 12 months. Employers would not be required to pay housing or transportation. Employers would pay at least the higher of the federal or state minimum wage.

STEM Act Stalled

One immigration reform bill called the STEM Act (Rep. Lamar Smith's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics bill - H.R. 6429) was blocked from a vote by Senate Democrats in the first week of December.

This bill would eliminate the visa lottery and shift those green cards to foreign graduates of U.S. universities in advanced STEM programs. The bill would also create a new student visa program to allow an unlimited number of foreign students to attend U.S. universities and major in STEM fields.

2012 Census of Agriculture to be Mailed Soon

Starting in late December, farmers across Pennsylvania can expect to see 2012 Census of Agriculture forms arriving in their mailboxes. Conducted every five years by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Census of Agriculture is a complete count of the nation's farms and ranches, and the people who operate them. Participation by agriculture producers is crucial.

Results from the Census are used by USDA and other organizations to develop programs and strategies for the agriculture industry. Results will be used in considering future farm programs, transportation and telecommunications infrastructure, rural economic development, conservation programs and new agriculture technologies.

Additionally, Census data is used by companies and cooperatives to determine locations of new agriculture facilities and by lawmakers when determining farm policies and program. Census questionnaires will be mailed to farm and ranch owners in late December, with forms due back Feb. 4, 2013. Producers can complete the forms by mail, or through a secure website at www.agcensus.usda.gov. Information provided by producers is kept confidential and data is only used for statistical purposes.

Another Invasive Pest Discovered in Pennsylvania

Penn State researchers recently discovered the African Fig Fly in Pennsylvania for the first time, giving fruit growers across the state another invasive pest to be on the lookout for.

The African Fig Fly (AFF), was discovered by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture in recent grape and pest survey traps. Dr. David Biddinger, biocontrol specialist at the Penn State Fruit Research and Extension Center in Biglerville, also positively identified the invasive fly in apple cider vinegar traps used for the seasonal monitoring of Spotted Wing Drosophila (SWD). SWD is another recently introduced invasive pest of small-fruit crops Dr. Biddinger first detected in Pennsylvania and Maryland in July of 2012.

After reviewing samples from 2011, Dr. Biddinger discovered AFF has been in Adams County for the last two growing seasons. "This is important because AFF is considered a tropical pest. Not only did it survive the extremely mild winter of 2011-12, but also the more typical previous winter," says Dr. Biddinger.

AFF is now recorded from Adams, York, Dauphin, and Clearfield counties according to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture. AFF's presence and damage potential in grapes and other crops is under investigation by Dr. Biddinger's lab and Kathy Demchak, Penn State small fruit specialist. Monitoring efforts throughout the state will continue next season by PDA and Penn State and records for new hosts and county records can be forwarded to either institution.

For more information about AFF and other fruit pests, visit Penn State's Fruit Research & Extension Center website at <http://agsci.psu.edu/frec>.

The Pennsylvania IPM program is a collaboration between the Pennsylvania State University and the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture aimed at promoting integrated pest management in both agricultural and urban settings. For more information, contact the program at [814-865-2839](tel:814-865-2839), or go to www.paipm.org.

Penn State to Host Vegetable, Small Fruit, Production Webinars

Penn State Extension's "Vegetable and Small Fruit Program Team" will soon host a series of monthly webinars on production. Participants involved in commercial fruit and vegetable production will receive updates from extension experts on emerging issues and trends.

Webinars will also serve as an online forum for producers to interact with researchers and others farms. Each seminar will be recorded for later viewing. The topics and dates for the upcoming webinars are: Jan. 8: Nutrient Management and Fertigation; Feb. 20: Good Ag Practices and Farm Food Safety Update; March 13: Recognizing and Protecting Pollinators and March 27: Cucurbit Pest Management.

Cost for the webinars is \$10 per session, or \$35 for all five. Register for the webinars online at <http://agsci.psu.edu/vegetable-production-webinars> or by phone at [724-627-3745](tel:724-627-3745)

DEP Implements New Policies for Permit Reviews

The state Department of Environmental Protection has recently finalized its reformed policies for permit reviews. In July, Gov. Tom Corbett issued an executive order requiring DEP to streamline its permitting process. A DEP review discovered that a major reason for delays was the large number of permit applications that lack required information.

Under the new system, DEP may deny applications that it must return twice to submitters due to incompleteness. The process encourages applicants to confer with DEP staff before submissions to ensure they understand the process and its requirements.

For permits submitted correctly, the state will offer a "permit decision guarantee," promising a ruling within a set time frame. The time frame varies, depending on the type of permit sought.

DEP said it plans to monitor the new policy over the next year and tweak it as needed. It is implementing paperless electronic notification and other measures along with the new policies and is planning webinars and other efforts to educate applicants about the changes. The policy covers 278 types of permits and authorizations, DEP said.

Tax Credits Still Available to Farmers to Protect Pennsylvania's Watersheds

Nearly \$1.3 million in tax credits are still available to farmers who purchase on-farm conservation equipment or install best management practices through the Resource Enhancement and Protection, or REAP, program.

REAP is a tax credit program for agricultural producers who enlist private support to reduce erosion and sedimentation that impacts Pennsylvania's watersheds. The program, administered by the State Conservation Commission, helps producers purchase conservation equipment and materials to help protect the environment.

Producers with proposed or completed projects can submit applications immediately. The projects will be considered on a first-come, first-served basis. Since REAP began in 2007, 3,498 projects worth more than \$48.2 million have been approved. More than \$103 million in public and private investments were made to implement these projects.

Farmers can receive tax credits of up to \$150,000 per agricultural operation for 50 or 75 percent of the total project cost. The most common projects approved are for no-till planting equipment, materials for waste storage facilities, manure management plans and protecting heavy animal use areas like barnyards.

Applications for the 2012-2013 REAP program are available at www.pda.state.pa.us/REAP under "Forms" or by calling [717-787-8821](tel:717-787-8821).

Information Available for Organic Producers

The United States Department of Agriculture provides regulations and guidance on certification, production, handling and labeling of USDA organic products at www.ams.usda.gov/nop. The website features handbooks, links to lists of certified operations and a certifying agents and much more. If you do not have access to the web, contact the National Organic Program Office at (202) 720-3252.

The National Organic Program (NOP) homepage also has information about the new residue testing rule which takes effect on January 1. The rule mandates that organic certifying agents must test samples from at least five percent of the operations they certify on an annual basis.

For more information about this rule: 1) click on "Rulemaking & Notices" under the "Organic Standards" section of the website listed above, and 2) select from the options under "Periodic Residue Testing" which is found below the "All Federal Register Notices" heading.

New App Available for Spraying Insecticide

USDA scientists have released two apps (one designed for aerial spraying and the other for ground-based application) for those who need to adjust insecticide spray equipment. Developed by two Agricultural Research Scientists, the apps are designed help aerial and ground-based crews have best guidance possible before spraying. You can learn more at <http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/AR/archive/nov12/insecticide1112.htm>.

The apps are available through the Apple iTunes App Store and the Google Play Android Marketplace (search for "Aerial Sprays" for the aerial application app and "Vector Sprays" for the ground-based sprayer app).

Produce Executive Development Program Registration Now Open

Registration for the 7th annual Produce Executive Development Program is now open. The program will be held March 10-15, 2013, at the Statler Hotel and Executive Conference Center on the Cornell University campus in Ithaca, New York.

The five-day program, presented through the United Fresh Produce Association's Foundation's Center for Leadership Excellence in partnership with the Cornell University Food Industry Management Program, is designed for mid- to senior-level executives. Topics for the course include executive leadership, competitive strategy, supply chain stimulation and understanding executive leadership styles.

"This program partners the experience of industry leaders with the insights of world class academics in an environment that fosters a valuable knowledge exchange," said Victoria Backer, United Fresh senior vice president of member services for the foundation, in the release. "It's an unmatched opportunity for learning and development, which is vital for even for the most seasoned executives."

For more information about the program, contact Shannon Young, United Fresh education manager, at 202-303-3400, ext. 405, or visit www.unitedfresh.org/programs/.

USDA RMA Funds Rural Tax Education Program

The United States Agriculture Department's Risk Management Agency has announced the availability of a website, Rural Tax Education (www.ruraltax.org), that provides farmers and ranchers agricultural related income and self-employment tax information that is both up to date and easy to understand.

The RMA-funded project is a collaborative effort of 15 land grant universities across the nation and is hosted by Utah State University. The home page offers a hot topic and informational webinars. There is no charge for the webinars and written material will also be available before the online training.

FSA Announces Farm Loan Guide Available

The Farm Service Agency (FSA) recently announced the availability of an online publication titled "Your Guide to FSA Farm Loans."

The guide is designed to serve as an informational tool and resource to help in providing outreach and technical assistance to farmers and ranchers. The guide, written in "plain language", provides information about FSA's farm loans and loan servicing options. A list of additional resources is also included in the guide. The guide is available online at www.fsa.usda.gov/daf .