

AG ISSUES UPDATE
Edited by Brad Hollabaugh
November, 2013

USApple, AWC Meet with House Leadership

USApple's Diane Kurrle and our partners in the Agriculture Workforce Coalition (AWC) continue working with key Republicans and Democrats in the House to urge action and find a path forward on meaningful agricultural labor reform.

Last week, Kurrle joined CEOs from the AWC at a meeting with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.) and a number of House Democrats active on the issue. Pelosi and the majority of the Democrats in the House have cosponsored a bill introduced by Representative Joe Garcia (D-Fla.) modeled after the comprehensive immigration bill which passed the Senate in June. The legislation includes the Senate agriculture provisions.

House Republicans Jeff Denham (R-Calif.), David Valadao (R-Calif.) and Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) joined the Democrats in this effort. However, it is unlikely that many more Republicans will sign on to the bill and there is acknowledgement from everyone that it will not be brought to the House floor for a vote.

House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) does not support a comprehensive approach to the issue but is instead electing to consider individual bills on a piecemeal basis. Following the meeting with Pelosi, the CEO group met directly with Chairman Goodlatte and his senior staff to discuss the needs of agriculture both in the short and long term. The discussion was thorough and productive with follow-up meetings between Judiciary staff and the AWC planned. We continue to seek a solution that works for agriculture and will pass the House with strong Republican support. (USApple, *Apple Bites*, November 4, 2013.)

USApple Files Comment Letter on FDA Proposed Produce Food Safety Rule

Near the end of October, USApple filed a comment letter with the FDA responding to the agency's "*Standards for the Growing, Harvesting, Packing and Holding of Produce for Human Consumption*," commonly referred to as the "Growing-Harvesting" rule. The rulemaking comment period, which closes on November 15, is part of the process of implementing the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA), the most sweeping reform of food safety regulation in over 70 years.

In the development of the comments, USApple coordinated with the United Fresh Produce Association, the Northwest Horticultural Council (NHC) and the Pacific Northwest Food Safety Committee. USApple's Technical Food Safety Task Force, chaired by Chris Schlect, NHC President, provided assistance in developing and reviewing the comment letter.

There is an old saying "If you didn't bother to vote, don't complain" that could well apply to the food safety rule proposals. The comment period, which closes November 15, offers growers the opportunity to communicate their concerns directly to the FDA. (USApple, *Apple Bites*, November 4, 2013.)

Farmers Tell Congress of the Need For Immigration Action

Several Pennsylvania Farm Bureau members traveled to Washington DC in late October to push Congress to act this year on immigration reform. Adams County fruit grower Chris Baugher, who joined the trip, said he had a difficult time this year finding enough labor to help with the harvest. Like many of the state's fruit growers, Baugher's operation relies on immigrant labor to get the harvest completed.

“We lost a lot of fruit because we lacked the labor supply,” he said. “They can do what they want with the border, but we need a legal work force.”

Earlier this year, the Senate passed a comprehensive immigration bill, but the House has yet to take a vote on the matter. During the October visit, Farm Bureau members met with Pennsylvania House members to urge their support for immigration reform this year.

Farm Bureau members represented a cross-section of agriculture including mushroom, fresh vegetables, and produce.

It is important for farmers, regardless of their commodity, to show a unified front when talking about immigration reform, said Joe Fecondo, a mushroom grower who traveled to Washington with Farm Bureau. “We have multiple sectors of agriculture talking about this issue,” he said. “A lot of different groups are coming together and talking with one voice.”

During their visits with House members, Pennsylvania farmers told of what is at stake if agriculture labor is not addressed by Congress. “If we don’t have adequate labor, you might as well take the trees out,” Baugher said.

Migrant labor supports more than just the local farm, Baugher said. Adams County is home to Knouse Foods, which employs hundreds of people and processes millions of apples a year into juice and apple sauce, he said.

Plus, food grown in the United States receives more scrutiny than produce coming from other countries, Fecondo said. “We need to ensure the American people that we have a safe, reliable, food supply,” he said.

Farm Bill Conference Committee Holds First Meeting

During the last week of October, the House-Senate Farm Bill conferees sat down for their first meeting. It was an opportunity for the forty-one member panel to present opening statements and lay out their priorities for the upcoming negotiations.

Senate Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and House Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.) both expressed confidence that they would reach agreement and get the job done, as did Ranking Members Thad Cochran (R-Miss.) and Collin Peterson (D-Minn.).

Passage of a new Farm Bill is a top priority for USApple as key programs including the Market Access Program (MAP), Specialty Crop Block Grants, Specialty Crop Research Initiative and fruit and vegetable snack program all receive their funding and authorization through the legislation. Both the House and Senate versions of the bill are good for specialty crops and provide level or even slight increases in funding. The most contentious issues remain the level of reforms and funding cuts to SNAP (formerly food stamp) and farm subsidies.

USApple and the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance (SCFBA) will follow the process closely and work with key offices as the negotiations move forward. (USApple, *Apple Bites*, November 4, 2013.)

Farm Bureau To Appeal EPA Case

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau and the American Farm Bureau Federation have filed a notice of appeal in a lawsuit against the federal Environmental Protection Agency over its Chesapeake Bay cleanup plan. The action is the first step in appealing a recent ruling by a federal judge that allows the EPA to move ahead with its sweeping nutrient and sediment reduction plan in the Chesapeake Bay Watershed.

Farm Bureau is concerned the decision by Judge Sylvia Rambo gives EPA unchecked authority to make local land use decisions throughout the watershed under proclamation of a Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL). Farm Bureau has contended the Clean Water Act gives state and local governments the power to make those decisions.

"We are appealing the court decision, because it would provide EPA with unbridled power to make decisions that could negatively impact farmers, homeowners, municipalities, school districts and businesses within the watershed," said PFB President Carl T. Shaffer.

That plan could make it difficult for farmers to manage their businesses because of the restrictions. Pennsylvania farmers, regardless of this court decision, will continue to implement conservation practices that prevent soil run off and prevent nutrients from reaching waterways, Shaffer said.

Pennsylvania Receives Nearly \$1 Million to Grow Specialty Crop Industry

Pennsylvania has received more than \$956,000 in federal grants to increase the visibility and usage of specialty produce, nursery and horticulture products. Funding comes through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Specialty Crop Block Grant program, authorized under the Farm Bill.

"Specialty crops are an important part of Pennsylvania's diverse agriculture industry, contributing more than \$1 billion in sales each year," said Agriculture Secretary George Greig. "These grants will help foster innovation, strengthen our farms and improve food access and quality for all Pennsylvanians."

Projects funded through the program focus on industry priorities including food safety, nutrition and marketing. Recipients include:

- **Pennsylvania Apple Marketing Program:** \$50,000 to promote Pennsylvania apples
- **National Peach Council:** \$30,000 to partner with the Pennsylvania Peach and Nectarine Research Program to promote Pennsylvania peaches
- **Pennsylvania Wine Association:** \$40,000 to develop a mobile app to market Pennsylvania wine
- **Pennsylvania Cooperative Potato Growers:** \$50,000 to improve frozen and prepared potato foods by identifying the best potato varieties for pan-frying
- **American Mushroom Institute:** \$50,000 to develop training for grower best practices and food safety

Landowner Liability Bill on Way to Governor's Desk

The Pennsylvania General Assembly has adopted a landowner liability bill for hunting on private property, which has been a priority issue for Pennsylvania Farm Bureau. The bill, which now heads to the desk of Gov. Tom Corbett, would protect landowners from liability when a hunter commits a Game Code violation on their property.

Currently, landowners could be found liable if a hunter commits a violation, such as taking game out of season, on their property. Senate Bill 648, introduced by Sen. Richard Alloway, will remove a landowner's liability in those circumstances.

"Current law provides a strong deterrent for landowners to allow anyone else to hunt or trap on their land, and the potential consequences create a serious issue for farmers and others who need to protect their crops," Alloway has said.

The bill adopted by the General Assembly removes the liability regardless of whether a landowner allows hunters to access their property for free, or charges a fee.

State Rep. Introduces Pension Reform Bill

State Rep. Glen Grell, a leading proponent of pension reform, has introduced a bill that would address Pennsylvania's looming pension crisis. Grell's three-phase plan would alter the state's current pension system to bridge the gap of a \$45 billion underfunded pension liability. State and school district employees are currently enrolled in a defined-benefit pension plan system.

Grell's plan calls for moving new employees, hired after June 30, 2015, into a cash-balance plan that would set fixed contributions for both employers and employees. It would also alter the current formula that considers an employee's length of service and makes benefit calculations based on the final years of employment.

Grell is also advocating that the state borrow \$9 billion to inject into the pension system through a series of bond purchases, which would reduce the pension liability by \$15 billion. Pennsylvania underfunded its pension system for 10 years, which contributed to the current crisis, Grell said.

The third portion of Grell's plan would offer current state and school employees the option of making a lower contribution rate and in return agree to changes in the final average salary calculations used to determine retirement benefits. Pennsylvania Farm Bureau is reviewing Grell's plan, but is supportive of legislation that address pension reform so that landowners are not faced with increased taxes to pay for the problem.

Property Tax Reform Bill Passes House

A bill that would give school districts the ability to move away from property taxes, and instead turn to other sources for funding, has passed the state House. The bill now moves to the Senate for consideration.

Pennsylvania Farm Bureau urged House lawmakers to support the Optional Property Tax Elimination Act, introduced by Rep. Seth Grove, because of the increased burden that many farm families are facing with property taxes. The bill gives local school districts the ability to shift from property taxes to earned income and related taxes. School districts are not required to shift their method of taxing.

"This flexibility is why House Bill 1189 will be successful," Grove said. "It does not mandate a one-size-fits-all fix. It allows local communities to choose their tax base. Earlier this session, House lawmakers defeated a bill that would have eliminated property taxes and instead increased earned income and sales taxes to pay for schools.

Penn State Addresses Youth Farm Safety

Penn State experts are working on new approaches to address farm safety for youths and young adults working in production agriculture. The goal is to reduce the risk of injury or death in young people who are working in the agriculture sector. The Safety in Agriculture for Youth project, led by experts in the College of Agriculture Sciences, will develop programs, activities and curriculum to reduce injuries to youth on farms.

Last year, there were 28 fatalities related to agriculture operations in Pennsylvania. Of those fatalities, a quarter involved youths age 19 or younger, said Dennis Murphy, a professor of agriculture safety at Penn State.

Penn State hopes the two-year project, supported by a \$600,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture, creates a national clearinghouse for agriculture safety and health curriculum for youth, Murphy said.

"This national collection of resources must be sensitive to all types and scales of production agriculture and to all ages and experience levels of target audiences," Murphy said. "It also must include parents and other educators, must be culturally appropriate, and must be useable in both formal [school] and non formal [home and ag industry] educational settings."

According to Murphy, a national steering committee will engage partners, such as Farm Bureau and FFA, to provide oversight and direction. "The committee will work to identify curriculum and testing gaps, certification needs and industry-recognized credentials," Murphy said.

Penn State will work with land-grant institutions across the country on a number of projects including virtual learning environments, a 10-hour agriculture safety course and promotional strategy for safety utilizing programs like FFA and 4-H.

Pennsylvania to Showcase Agriculture Education in 2014

Pennsylvania has been selected to host the 2014 National Agriculture in the Classroom Conference, providing a chance to showcase the diversity of the state's agriculture industry at a national level. For more than 20 years, the Pennsylvania Friends of Agriculture Foundation, a charitable organization supported by Pennsylvania Farm Bureau, has hosted a statewide Ag in the Classroom conference in State College.

This marks the first time that Pennsylvania has been selected to host this national conference. Several hundred educators from across the country are expected to attend the conference for four days of workshops and tours. The workshop, held June 23-27 in Hershey, will help teachers learn new ways to teach agriculture across various curriculum areas. The Pennsylvania Friends of Agriculture Foundation's statewide workshop will be held in conjunction with the national conference.

The Pennsylvania Ag in the Classroom workshop will return to State College in 2015. If you know an educator who would be interested in attending the conference, encourage them to visit: www.pafbfriends.org.

PDA Hosts Celebration for 25 Years of Farmland Preservation

Moments after their farm was included in the Pennsylvania farmland preservation program, Jere and Angie Hissong opened their barn doors for a celebration of the 25th anniversary of the program. The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture selected the Hissong farm in Franklin County as the backdrop for a celebration and news conference on the success of farmland preservation in the state.

Pennsylvania leads the nation in farmland preservation, with more than 480,000 acres set aside from development. Nearly 4,500 farms in 57 counties have participated in the program since its inception in 1988. The Hissongs, who belong to the Franklin County Farm Bureau, were thrilled the state chose Spring House Farms, which dates back to the American Revolution, as a host site.

Agriculture Secretary George Greig said the success of the state's farmland preservation program is due in large part to the foresight of elected leaders, who were concerned about the loss of farmland, and farmers who wanted to preserve ground for the next generation.

Fruit Farm to Demonstrate Biomass Greenhouse Heating System

Twin Springs Fruit Farm is hosting a field to demonstrate their new biomass greenhouse heating system. The date is Tuesday, December 10, 2013. Twin Springs Fruit Farm will offer a field day to display the new biomass heating system for greenhouse heating.

Twin Springs has been growing greenhouse vegetables since 1992 and recently upgraded their former coal system to woody biomass. The diversified agricultural operation installed a 3.5 million BTU boiler to handle their existing 23,000 SF of greenhouse space and a planned 10,000 SF expansion. Biomass equipment is now available for smaller operations requiring large amounts of heat and can offer considerable savings to a variety of operators.

The date is Tuesday, December 10, 2013 from 9:00am to 11:30am. Topics will include biomass basics, sourcing fuel, solid fuel considerations, and biomass economics. The farm is located at 936 Orchard Rd, Orrtanna, Pa 17353 approximately seven miles west of Gettysburg. Please contact the farm at 717-642-8988 for more information. (*Penn State Extension*)