

AG ISSUES UPDATE
Edited by Brad Hollabaugh
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Obama Delays Immigration Action

USA Today reports that President Obama “has now decided to delay any action on overhauling the nation’s immigration system until after the November election”. A White House official said “the president still planned to roll out the changes, which have been in the works for several months, before the end of the year”.

President Obama had earlier noted that he would take action on immigration policy on his own since the Congress has been unable to achieve any substantive results. However, more recently, the president has been under pressure from democrats who face difficult re-election battles. The fear is that there might be a political backlash favoring republican candidates from any executive action on immigration at this time.

Executive actions on immigration policy are limited and may challenge the boundaries of the U.S. Constitution. However, the White House has been continually pressured by groups who favor changing the immigration system and ending deportations. A stay of action at this time may be as unpopular for the president as is the risk of losing democratic seats in Congress. Ultimately, the Hispanic voters who had strongly supported Obama in the last election may alter their votes or just stay home on election day if they feel betrayed.

Improving immigration policy has been a long time objective for our industry. Any executive action at this time could be overturned by Congress or ruled unconstitutional by the courts. So, our battle to gain immigration reform – and greater labor security -- for agriculture continues.

Russia Bans Ag Imports

Russian officials recently announced a one-year ban on American agriculture imports. Although this ban may have a limited impact on U.S. agriculture, it will affect the Pacific Northwest’s apple and pear export programs this coming crop year.

While the loss of direct sales is a concern, there are also the indirect impacts. For example, European apples that ordinarily were exported to Russia are left in sales limbo. Reportedly, Poland, which exports a substantial portion of their crop, is already asking the United States to open our market for its so-called “freedom apples”, according to Christian Schlect, President of the Northwest Horticultural Council.

Russia imports about \$1.3 billion in American agriculture commodities, accounting for about 1 percent of total U.S. sales, said Veronica Nigh, an economist with AFBF. “The bigger impact is on the Russian consumer,” she said. “Russia imports about 40 percent of its food and we’re predicting shortages and price hikes because the U.S. and the European Union have been the primary suppliers to the Russian market because we offer a wider variety of food at a lower cost.”

The ban on U.S. and E.U. producers includes all meat, fish, dairy, fruits and vegetables. “The U.S. poultry sector will see the largest hit”, Nigh said.

Farmers Talk Pension with Corbett

Gov. Tom Corbett spent the summer discussing pension reform with Pennsylvanians after the General Assembly failed to address the issue during budget negotiations. The state’s pension liability stands at \$50 billion. That’s double what the state budgets in a given fiscal year. Farmers do not fault retired state

workers or teachers who have paid into the system. However, there's growing concern that if lawmakers do not address the situation, property owners will be on the hook to make up the shortfall.

Corbett has supported a plan that would move new employees into a hybrid 401-K system. While it would not address the current shortfalls in the system, it would also ensure that others are not added into an unsustainable plan, Corbett said. Pension reform is something all lawmakers should get behind, regardless of party affiliation, Corbett said.

Corbett also urged farmers to keep up the pressure and make sure their representatives support pension reform. "Farmers across the state need to talk about this," he said. "We are spending this time getting people on board."

Pension Plan Could Save \$24.5 Billion

A pension reform proposal floated by Rep. Glen Grell would cut employer contributions by \$24.5 billion over the next 30 years, with the savings coming through a series of bonds.

Actuaries for the Pennsylvania Public Retirement Commission (PERC) reviewed Grell's proposal and found the state could save on its pension obligation by issuing \$9 billion in pension obligation bonds, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* reported. Grell said he was pleased the analysis by PERC confirmed that his plan will result in savings.

Last year, Grell introduced a three-phased approach to solving the state's pension problem, including the issuing of bonds to make up a portion of an estimated \$50 billion shortfall in the system. Pennsylvania's two public employee pensions—one for state workers the other for school employees- are underfunded due to several factors including poor market performance.

Farm Bureau Argues EPA Violated Law in Data Release

The American Farm Bureau Federation argued recently in federal court the Environmental Protection Agency violated federal law when it released the personal information of farmers to activist groups. Farm Bureau has sued the EPA after the agency released the personal information of thousands of farmers from 29 states in 2013.

The EPA provided the information to three environmental groups that had filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act. The data included the names of farmers, along with home address, GPS coordinates, telephone numbers and emails.

"The EPA is displaying a callous disregard for basic privacy rights," AFBF President Bob Stallman said. "EPA believes that if information about you can be found somewhere on the Internet, or if you own a closely held family corporation, you have no interest in protecting your personal information. All citizens should be worried about that, not just farmers and ranchers."

In its court filings, AFBF argues federal law prevents agencies from releasing personal information when complying with a Freedom of Information Act request. EPA has agreed not to release more information pending the court's decision on this lawsuit.

Wood Quarantine in Place

Five southeastern Pennsylvania counties are under a quarantine order because of Thousands Cankers Disease. The disease was found on black walnut trees in Chester County. The quarantine restricts the movement of wood and wood products from Bucks, Chester, Delaware, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties.

The disease is caused by the walnut twig beetle, which carries a fungus as it tunnels into the bark of walnut trees. The fungus causes cankers to form, causing tree death within 10 years in infestation. Black walnut is highly-sought after hardwood, used in woodworking and furniture making. The quarantine restricts movement of all walnut material, and all hardwood firewood.

Restrictions Lifted on Marketing Wood Products in USDA Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture recently issued a final rule that will eliminate restrictions on including mature wood products in the agency's BioPreferred program.

The move comes after legislation sponsored by Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson—known as the Forest Products Fairness Act—was included in the 2014 Farm Bill. This change will open new markets for forest products and ensures the federal government use American-grown products whenever possible.

The Forest Products Fairness Act changes the definition of "biobased" product under the BioPreferred program to include forest products previously excluded. The BioPreferred program was created in 2002 to promote the use of biobased products through preferred procurement initiative for federal agencies. Previous guidelines excluded mature market products, creating a market disadvantage for forest products.

PDA/Penn State Asking For Help with Beetle Detection

The Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture and Penn State are asking for citizen help in collecting and submitting Asian longhorned beetles to experts. Suspected beetles can be submitted to a regional office of the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture or a county Extension office.

The Asian longhorned beetle is an invasive insect that can threaten the state's native tree population. Citizen involvement will help both agencies monitor the spread of the bug and development management plans. Adult Asian longhorned beetles are three-quarters to one-and-a-quarter inch long with a black glossy body with white spots on each wing. The bug also has two large black and bluish-white antennae.

Beetle larvae tunnel through tree stems, which cuts off the flow of nutrients and kills the tree. The beetle prefers maple trees, but will also attack other species. Citizens can ship a sample to their local extension office along with a sample submission form. Forms are available at agriculture.state.pa.us by searching "sample submission form" and scrolling down to "publications."

PGC Considers Permits for Using State Game Lands for Non-Hunting Activities

The Pennsylvania Game Commission is reviewing a proposal that would charge a user fee for activities other than hunting.

If adopted, the permit program would be charged for anyone riding a bicycle, horse or snowmobile on designated trails on state game lands. Hikers and birdwatchers would not be charged a fee.

Members of the Pennsylvania Board of Game Commissioners will consider the permit fee at a meeting later this month. Under the recommendation, riding a bike, horse or snowmobile would fall under the existing State Game Lands Shooting Range Permit—which costs \$30.

Anyone with a valid hunting or furtaker license would not be charged a user fee, regardless of the activity they are involved in.

The permit fee would offset the cost of repairs caused by damage from usage from bicycle riding or use of snowmobiles, the Game Commission said. Low-impact users like hikers and birdwatchers typically don't cause damage to game lands, the commission said.

Currently, the management of game lands is financed largely through annual hunter and trapper fees. Game lands have historically been open to other recreation pursuits. The Game Commission spent \$4 million over the past three years on trail, parking lot and game land road maintenance. The permit would also help regulate riding on designated trails and prevent the creation of non-designated trails.

Demand Growing for Farmers Markets

New data collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture shows consumer demand for farmers markets is growing. The recently released National Farmers Market Directory shows there are 8,268 farmers markets across the country, an increase of 76 percent since 2008. USDA data has found the growing demand for farmers markets is growing in every region of the country.

"The National Farmers Market Directory numbers reflect the continued importance of farmers markets to American agriculture. Since its inception, the directory has proven to be a valuable tool for accessing up-to-date information about local farmers markets," said Anne Alonzo, Agricultural Marketing Service administrator. "Farmers markets play an extremely important role for both farmers and consumers. They bring urban and rural communities together while creating economic growth and increasing access to fresh, healthy foods."

For more information about farmers markets visit: farmersmarkets.usda.gov.