

Farmworkers, climate and wildfires are the focus of new legislation in California

The California Legislature is planning an active session this year to make up for lost time in 2020, despite legislative leaders calling for lawmakers to curtail the number of bills introduced.

With a deadline last Friday for introducing new measures, the tally stands at more than 2,300 bills to kick off the season, just 200 shy of the 2019 session. And many more measures are still to come. Nearly 400 of those are simply “spot bills,” which act as placeholders for measures to be fleshed out later in the session, and certain types of bills can still be introduced past the deadline. Another workaround known as “gut and amend” will allow for still more measures to appear throughout the year—sometimes just hours before passage.

On the agriculture front, *Agri-Pulse* is tracking about 150 bills so far. Here are a few rising to the top of the pile.

Conservation and climate change

After Gov. Gavin Newsom committed the state to preserving 30% of its land and coastal waters by 2030, a number of measures have popped up that aim to conserve land, wildlife and ecosystems.

Assembly Bill 377, for example, would require all California surface waters to be fishable, swimmable and drinkable by 2050. The California Farm Bureau and a large coalition of agricultural and business organizations are heavily opposing the measure.



California State capitol

Several bills aim to encourage on-farm conservation practices. Assemblymembers Lorena Gonzalez of San Diego and Ash Kalra of San Jose have introduced a measure requiring all agencies to prioritize biodiversity protections.

“This measure will help restore our environment, make our ecosystems more resilient, and treat this ecological crisis with the urgency it truly deserves,” said Gonzalez.

A slew of measures take aim at reducing greenhouse gas emissions or capturing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere to reduce global warming. Assembly Ag Chair Robert Rivas of Hollister has revived a bill to sequester carbon and reduce greenhouse gas emissions in natural and working lands.

“The state can set goals and targets all we want,” said Rivas. “But without meaningful engagement on best practices for landowners, these goals remain unattainable.”

A measure by a Berkeley senator would similarly set sequestration goals for natural and working lands as well. And two lawmakers have introduced a goal of achieving carbon neutrality by 2045 across California, though few details are yet available.

Other proposals include incentives for clean trucks and tractors, carbon credits for whole orchard recycling and climate adaptation plans for considering the impacts on agriculture.



Asm. Autumn Burke, D-Marina del Rey

After the governor signaled he would revive his proposal for a climate resilience bond in 2022, two similar bond measures have been introduced that build on prior bills. One is for \$5.5 billion; the other for \$6.7 billion. They offer provisions for protecting water supplies from climate risks and for incentivizing practices like healthy soils, groundwater recharge and conservation easements.

Following two years of failures to pass a measure on single-use plastics, Asm. Phil Ting of San Francisco has refined the focus to specifically limit plastics that are considered compostable.

Also under the umbrella of climate-smart agriculture, Kalra wants to incentivize ranchers to become farmers—or to produce “plant-based agriculture,” as his bill describes it. This would be part of CDFR’s suite of climate programs. Likewise, a Los Angeles lawmaker would subsidize plant-based meals and milk alternatives in schools.

When it comes to pesticides and environmental protections, Bay Area Asm. Rebecca Bauer-Kahan is proposing to ban seeds treated with the neonicotinoid class of pesticides. Her new bill is the second attempt to prohibit the seeds recently.

Farmworkers and labor protections

A bill by Asm. Autumn Burke of Los Angeles is also in the realm of climate policy. It would require every project funded through cap-and-trade revenues to include fair and responsible employer standards and inclusive policies, including unionization, retirement benefits, sick leave and vacation.

Senator Maria Elena Durazo of Los Angeles has introduced a measure to grant healthcare coverage to all Californians, regardless of immigration status. Durazo, a former labor leader, has aggressively advocated for farmworker rights during her tenure.

In introducing a bill on COVID-19 vaccines, Asm. Eduardo Garcia of Coachella called for the state to prioritize farmworkers and grocery store employees within the top tier alongside frontline healthcare workers.

Kalra has reintroduced a controversial measure requiring ag employers to notify H-2A guestworkers of their labor and housing protections, with the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation as the sponsor. The bill includes provisions mandating paid travel time, lighting requirements and tenancy rights.

Another lawmaker is adding to a measure signed into law last year that requires immediate notifications for coronavirus outbreaks in workplaces. AB 654 would have those notifications posted publicly on a website. Along those lines, Los Angeles Sen. Henry Stern has a bill that would require employers to implement contact tracing programs.

Several lawmakers, including a moderate Democrat, have signed onto a measure to establish farmworker resource centers to assist with education, housing, wage rights and health services.

A moderate Democrat in Merced, Asm. Adam Gray has called for the state to foot the costs for new COVID-19 regulations. He introduced a bill that would provide tax credits for essential and small businesses having to comply with “costly” new COVID-19 regulations.



Megan Dahle, R-Bieber

Wildfires and agriculture

Wildfires will be a central focus of the budget this year. Many provisions and bills would bolster efforts to prevent, suppress and help with recovery from catastrophic fires.

When it comes to agriculture, Rivas has co-authored a bill that would charge Cal/OSHA with establishing a stockpile of N95 respirators to deploy to farmworkers when wildfire smoke is present. He has also introduced a measure to make grazing on public lands more accessible in order to prevent the spread of wildfires. The California Cattlemen’s Association is sponsoring the bill.

In an effort to better protect cattle, Republican Asm. Megan Dahle, who runs a seed and trucking business in Lassen County with her husband, Sen. Brian Dahle, has introduced legislation allowing farmers and ranchers access to their lands during disasters. It would grant a special agricultural pass allowing a producer entry through a police roadblock during a flood, storm, fire, earthquake or other event.

Water supply and land fallowing

Senator Melissa Hurtado is back with Senate Bill 559, after the measure fell victim twice to Appropriations committees and then to Newsom’s veto power. The new bill expands beyond funding repairs for the sinking Friant-Kern Canal to address maintenance needs for the Delta-Mendota Canal and the California Aqueduct as well, calling for nearly \$800 million to fund the projects.

Rivas and Asm. Rudy Salas of Bakersfield, meanwhile, are looking to the million or so acres of farmland anticipated to be fallowed as plans for the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) are gradually implemented over the next 20 years. They want to establish a planning program to support repurposing those lands for groundwater recharge, cattle grazing and ecological restoration projects.

Another measure would offer technical assistance grants to help landowners reduce water usage under SGMA. It targets critically overdrafted basins in the San Joaquin Valley and prioritizes socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. The measure would allocate up to \$300,000 for each project.

Farmers tell Newsom to stop blaming agriculture when setting climate goals

California farmers are pushing back on Gov. Gavin Newsom's goal to conserve 30% of the state's land by 2030. During public workshops last week, farmers said the governor and lawmakers should recognize the state already imposes some of the strictest environmental regulations in the world on the industry.

“We've been regulated to the place where we are the leaders and the best,” said San Diego County Farm Bureau Director Hannah Gbeh during the CDEA meeting. “I would really love our state to start focusing on how to expand agriculture. Planting trees sequesters carbon.”

Gbeh's county has lost 70,000 acres of production in nine years to urban development, shrinking the industry by 20%. Supporting more land production would also tackle the United Nations food security goal of increasing global food production by 70% by 2050. This and the climate crisis are opportunities to reframe the discussion, she said, while offering incentives to offset the loss of agricultural lands in the state.



Gov. Newsom signing 30 by 30 executive order.

“It cannot be overstated how severe of a crisis this state is dealing with in our agricultural industry,” said Gbeh.

Jenna Galardi, who handles compliance for her small family farm in the Salinas Valley, said as regulations have grown more complex she has considered pursuing a law degree just to understand them.

“The amount of regulations that agriculture is scrutinized under right now is so overwhelming,” said Galardi. “We need support right now. We need help.”

She said the farm's resources are stretched thin and cannot keep up, especially with COVID-19 precautions in place and the market instability over the past year. Many other countries competing with California agriculture do not have such strict protections for air and water quality and worker safety, said Galardi, adding that the solution is not more legislation but more general support for farmers. This would also reduce the carbon footprint of importing goods from thousands of miles away, she said.

Another farmer argued the housing crisis is creating a push to pave over farmland, making it even harder for beginning farmers to acquire land while also cutting off access to markets.

As CDFA looks for farmer-led solutions to climate issues, Mary Kimball, CEO of the Center for Land-Based Learning, emphasized that farmers must be paid for climate-smart practices. She said there is no shortage of great management practices, but relying on a farmer to quantify the amount of carbon stored adds yet another onerous burden to the many compliance requirements.

Adding to that point, California Farm Bureau policy advocate Taylor Roschen said farmers need consistent incentive funding, rather than the “feast and famine approach” through annual appropriations, in order to establish long-term climate-smart practices, especially ones that do not improve yield or crop quality.

Amrith Gunasekara, science advisor to the CDFA secretary, pushed back, asking Roschen and others to offer specific solutions for CDFA in resolving these issues.

“We've certainly heard on the regulations a lot from folks,” said Gunasekara. “If there are any solutions out there, other than taking back the regulations, please let us know.”

A commenter named Luciana responded that CDFA should build partnerships by sitting down face to face with farmer groups, since few growers participate in “sterile and sometimes challenging” public forums.



*San Diego County Farm Bureau Executive Director
Hannah Gbeh*

Roschen suggested CDFA work directly with various grower groups as well as pest control advisors, crop advisors, and academic and technical experts. With funding, the administration should encourage continuous appropriations, as the state already does with its Sustainable Agricultural Lands Conservation program. Roschen added that the department could market the practices in ways that motivate farmers, rather than encouraging emission reductions. This could include water savings, lowering the amount of fertigation, better pest management, better yields, lower production costs or easier regulatory compliance.

Karen Buhr, the executive director of the California Association of Resource Conservation Districts, added that CDFA should help growers to understand some of the regulatory ramifications presented by climate-smart practices like composting, which has in the past raised issues at the State Water Resources Control Board.

The conversation continues as CDFA hosts the final workshop for its series of climate discussions on Friday, covering perennial crops.

Ag climate policy faces uncertain future amid partisanship, funding questions

Even as congressional Democrats push through a \$1.9 trillion economic stimulus package, attention is turning to legislation that could be used to fund agricultural climate initiatives: an infrastructure package that could be in the range of \$3 trillion.

However, there are already concerns that the partisanship around the stimulus bill could make it harder to pass a climate-infrastructure bill, which will be needed to enact President Joe Biden's Build Back Better agenda.

At this early stage, it's also far from clear what exactly would be in the package for agriculture, or for just about anything else. Also unclear is whether there might be a separate tax package that would include climate-related incentives.

Biden's Build Back Better plan envisions significant new funding for agricultural conservation measures, and **Senate Agriculture Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., also has indicated that she is eyeing a climate bill to put new money into farm bill conservation programs. "We can't wait for the next farm bill in 2023," she told reporters last month. She has not said how that money should be spent.**



Senate Ag Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich.

But Democrats will risk losing agricultural support if they don't work with Republicans on the package, and opposition from farm groups helped sink the Obama administration's attempt in 2009 to address climate change from a cap-and-trade bill.

"We're not going to support anything meaningful in this space that's not bipartisan," said Andrew Walmsley, director of congressional relations with the American Farm Bureau Federation. "It needs to have longevity, and you only get to that with bipartisan signoff."

Democrats are using the budget reconciliation process to pass the \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill because it allows them to get the bill through the 50-50 Senate without needing any GOP votes. Under normal procedures, it requires 60 votes to pass a bill in the Senate. **Democrats haven't said whether they would try to use the reconciliation process to pass their climate initiatives, but if they do, they'll have to wait until the 2022 budget year, which starts Oct. 1; reconciliation can only be used once each fiscal year.**

AFBF is a co-founding member of the Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance, a coalition that is spearheading the sector's lobbying effort on climate policy. FACA's policy proposals include several that require significant new funding, including a one-time payment for early adopters of conservation practices and a possible new tax credit for carbon sequestration measures.

No funding amounts are spelled out in the FACA proposals. AFBF is one of 22 groups on FACA's steering committee, 14 of which were added this week. Several conservation groups are participating, including the Environmental Defense Funds and The Nature Conservancy.

Walmsley said during FACA meetings, AFBF leaders press the importance of ensuring that policy changes have bipartisan support.

One way some lawmakers believe they could smooth the passage of a climate/infrastructure bill is by restoring the ability of senators and House members to “earmark,” or designate spending for, specific projects in their states and districts. Earmarks have been banned for 10 years.

Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., told reporters he was confident a giant infrastructure bill could get the 60 votes necessary to pass the Senate if lawmakers are allowed to earmark projects. “We can create much more bipartisan appropriation bills and infrastructure bills with earmarks,” he said.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, also supports earmarking, though she said the names of lawmakers who are sponsoring the funding should be disclosed.

Another unanswered question for the climate/infrastructure bill is how, and to what extent, the cost would have to be offset by tax increases or other measures.



Sen. Richard Durbin, R-Ill.

Danielle Beck, senior executive director of government affairs for the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, said on an NCBA briefing Tuesday that an infrastructure bill could be introduced this spring, and **her group is concerned about potential tax provisions that could be attached, including Biden’s proposal to eliminate the step-up in basis for inherited assets.** Under current law, capital gains taxes on the sale of inherited property are based on its value at the time of death rather than when the asset was originally acquired.

A climate/infrastructure bill is one of at least three major funding mechanisms for ag climate initiatives on which FACA is focused. The other two: the annual appropriations process and USDA’s Commodity Credit Corp. spending authority.

According to representatives of FACA-affiliated groups, the coalition is going to try to use the appropriations process to fund needs such as increased agricultural research, soil sampling, and a survey of existing on-farm energy production, including methane digesters.

USDA, meanwhile, is looking at using CCC funds to set up an ag carbon bank that could buy and sell ag carbon credits. USDA officials have not discussed the size of the program, but USDA could have as much as \$10 billion or more available in the CCC each year depending on the amount that must be spent on other priorities, such as making commodity program payments and funding commodity marketing loans. USDA’s CCC authority is capped at \$30 billion. Meanwhile, cutting money from farm bill commodity programs to fund ag carbon measures would be a non-starter with AFBF as well as many — if not most — other farm groups. “That hasn’t been on the table, and that’s not something that we would support,” Walmsley said.

Rob Larew, president of the National Farmers Union, another FACA member, stopped short of ruling out supporting some shift in farm bill funding. “Certainly, it would make us very nervous. If we’re talking about taking money out of one pot to fill up another, we’d want to know exactly what that looks like and why.”

Minority advocates say debt relief provisions have legal backing

Advocates for minority farmers say historical discrimination justifies providing payments totaling 120% of debt held by “socially disadvantaged” farmers, as approved by the House Agriculture Committee in its \$16.1 billion COVID relief package, part of a larger \$1.9 trillion relief bill to be considered by the full House of Representatives.

“Statutorily, I think we’re on sound ground,” said Quinton Robinson, a policy adviser for the Rural Coalition and an attorney in northern Virginia who has represented farmers in discrimination cases. “It just becomes an issue of how does the Secretary [of Agriculture] do this politically.”



House Ag Committee Chair David Scott, D-Ga.

“Congress will leave this broad enough to give the secretary flexibility to establish a program of debt relief for minority farmers,” he said. The Congressional Budget Office estimates the cost of the provision at \$4 billion. The extra 20% is to pay taxes on the debt relief, which counts as income.

The National Council of Farmer Cooperatives on Wednesday issued a statement on the stimulus bill that praised the legislation for addressing “the need for equity and inclusion” in the ag sector.

The bill "contains important provisions, including debt relief and other assistance and support, for socially disadvantaged farmers and ranchers. These provisions will better ensure that all producers can come out of the pandemic ready to feed, clothe and fuel their fellow Americans and billions of people across the globe," NCFC said.

The Organic Trade Association also expressed support for the debt relief: “The organic movement is making a conscious effort to ensure that our successes in growing the market do not unintentionally perpetuate social inequalities, and it is ready to help advance this important legislation.”

In a statement, USDA said the debt relief provision recognizes “that systemic discrimination and prejudice toward Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic farmers and other agricultural producers of color continues to exist and continues to contribute to a cycle of debt, which is even more difficult to overcome due to COVID. ”

The legislation uses a definition based in the 1990 farm bill that says socially disadvantaged farmers “have been subjected to racial or ethnic prejudice because of their identity as members of a group without regard to their individual qualities.”

“Programs to serve socially disadvantaged farmers and their unique needs are not new,” the department said. “The Senate and House efforts to bring greater equity to agriculture are long overdue and should be applauded. USDA looks forward to working with Congress to provide feedback and implement new programs to ensure equity, should they be passed into law.”

Tom Vilsack, the recently-confirmed ag secretary, has repeatedly pledged to tackle historic discrimination at USDA. Critics say he did too little to address the issue when he held the position during the Obama administration.

The debt relief provision cleared the House Ag Committee on a party-line, 25-23 vote with Democrats in the majority. Committee Chairman David Scott, D-Ga., said he was “pleased to be a part of this effort to put our Black farmers in a better position after suffering the impacts of this pandemic and the inability to receive equal access to USDA programs over decades.”



Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga.

The language in the bill would provide relief to Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans and Asian Americans, a committee staffer said.

Republicans objected, with Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., arguing that legal settlements in two cases known as *Pigford* providing \$2.25 billion to Black farmers should have been sufficient, and questioned the constitutionality of the measure. His office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the basis of that opinion.

However, House Ag Republicans filed dissenting views on the stimulus package that said the committee should have a hearing on the minority farmer debt challenges before enacting debt relief provisions. The Republicans noted that Democrats had trouble answering questions about the provision as it was being debated in committee.

"The Minority believes that issues of social justice and addressing historical racial inequities in USDA programs is a worthy and important endeavor for the Committee. These issues certainly deserve thorough review, thoughtful analysis, and a deliberative process to determine the best policy solutions to address the problems faced by socially disadvantaged farmers," the committee Republicans wrote.

Another discrimination case involving Native American farmers, *Keepseagle v. Vilsack*, resulted in creation of a \$680 million compensation fund with an additional \$80 million in debt relief, according to the Native American Agriculture Fund, which was created as a trust as part of the 2010 settlement. USDA and the Justice Department in 2011 also established a voluntary process to settle the claims of Hispanic and female farmers, with \$1.33 billion made available to eligible farmers with discrimination claims. Rudy Arredondo, head of the National Latino Farmers and Ranchers Trade Association, said about \$207 million was paid out under that process.

Robinson said Congress has already enacted legislation providing for debt relief, back in 1987. The 1987 law, enacted amid a nationwide farm crisis, required USDA to write down severely delinquent loans if the cost of restructuring was less than the cost of foreclosing.

“There was no constitutional problem then,” he said. “So currently, if Congress says, for the purposes of maintaining our farm operations, including Black farm operations and minority farmers generally, we’re going to relieve debt within the confines of the farm loan programs, Congress has the authority to do that.”

Regarding the current measure, Robinson said, “In this case, Congress has said there’s a history of discrimination against this class of farmers, and that gives [them] a right to write this statute

targeted to minority farmers, because of a history of invidious discrimination, discrimination that we can point to, that we can touch, that we can feel over a long period of time.”

Robinson points to provisions already in the law giving USDA broad authority to grant debt relief, including 7 U.S.C. 2008(a), which allows the secretary to provide equitable farm loan debt relief, and 7 CFR 766, which address loan servicing.

The plan to provide 120% debt relief arose from discussions with the Biden transition team.

John Boyd, head of the National Black Farmers Association, said the debt relief is needed because some Black farmers were left out of the *Pigford* settlements. A court monitor’s final report on implementation of the consent decree in *Pigford* called the case “a good first step, and more, towards accomplishing the goals that were at the heart of the settlement.”

"USDA has to change the way it does business with Blacks and other ethnic groups, how they roll out their relief packages to everybody," Boyd said. "There's just not enough outreach and communication to the Black farmers."

In 1920, Black farmers made up 14% of all farmers in the U.S. Now, Scott said, it’s 1%. Mai Nguyen, founder of the Asian American Farmers Alliance, said, "We endorsed the effort through our membership at Rural Coalition, and deeply appreciate the continued Black-led work that lifts us all."

She said the "linguistically and geographically diverse" farmers she represents have not "had much successful federal engagement" and during the COVID-19 pandemic, "We at AAFA knew that any government effort would be slow and conduct insufficient outreach, so we focused on creating direct relief by fundraising through philanthropic entities for both relief funds (\$835,000) and compensating culturally competent community members to contact, interpret, and translate our application process (\$50,000) for California [Black, Indigenous and People of Color] farmers and land stewards. Eighty independent entities received between \$5,000-\$20,000, which is more than what they'd be eligible for through existing [USDA] programs."

Arredondo said he doesn't know how much relief Latino farmers would be eligible for. "It could be some relief for some," he said. **"My concern is how are we going to be able to sustain our farmers. The debt thing is something useful, but that’s not the end-all to the situation we’re in."**

Former Ag Secretary Dan Glickman said he had not looked at the measure, “so I really can't comment on it intelligently.” Nevertheless, he said the relief provided through the *Pigford* settlements “was probably, when you look back, historically incomplete. There's no question that the goal of increasing the number of minority farmers is an important goal to achieve. **Aspirationally, it sounds like a very good thing.**”

Another long-standing issue that has faced Black farmers is an issue known as “heir’s property.” That is where Blacks farm family-owned land that is part of an estate that didn’t clear probate. The descendants lack a clear, marketable title on the land, which also kept some Black farmers from participating in USDA programs.

The 2018 farm bill included a provision to make it easier for the heir’s property farmer to qualify for USDA assistance by authorizing alternative documentation for obtaining a USDA farm number.

Farm groups welcome Vilsack confirmation

The nation's food and agriculture groups are glad to have a familiar face back at the helm of the Department of Agriculture.

Tom Vilsack was confirmed to once again be the Secretary of Agriculture in a sweeping bipartisan vote Tuesday, setting the former Iowa governor up for another stint in one of the most important seats in American agriculture.

Six Republican senators voted against his nomination — Marco Rubio and Rick Scott of Florida, Ted Cruz of Texas, Josh Hawley of Missouri, Dan Sullivan of Alaska, and Rand Paul of Kentucky; only one member who caucuses with the Democrats — Vermont Independent Bernie Sanders — voted in opposition. Sanders later told The Washington Post he wanted someone “a little bit more vigorous in terms of protecting family farms and taking on corporate agriculture.”



Sec. Tom Vilsack

Indeed, some progressive farm and environmental groups have raised questions about Vilsack, citing his tenure with the Obama administration as reason for their concern. But the vast majority of rural stakeholders say they are glad to see him back in office.

Here's a roundup of a few thoughts from some of the key players in farm policy:

American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall: “AFBF congratulates Tom Vilsack on his confirmation as the next Secretary of Agriculture. His strong track record of leadership and previous experience at USDA will serve rural America well. Secretary Vilsack and I have spoken several times in recent weeks about opportunities and challenges facing America's farmers and ranchers, and I look forward to close collaboration.”

National Farmers Union President Rob Larew: “No one is more qualified to lead the USDA than Tom Vilsack. After serving as Secretary of Agriculture for eight years, he knows the agency inside and out, giving him the insight he needs to get to work right away on behalf of family farmers, rural communities, and hungry Americans.”

Farm Credit Council President and CEO Todd Van Hoose: “Farm Credit congratulates Secretary Vilsack on his confirmation as USDA Secretary. His depth and breadth of knowledge about the issues facing agriculture are unparalleled. We look forward to working with him to combat the challenges of climate change, address issues of diversity in agriculture and find opportunities for the farmers and ranchers that feed this country and the world to succeed.”

American Soybean Association President Kevin Scott: “We appreciate that Secretary Vilsack always supported farmers and understood that they are a driving force for the rural economy. We are confident that he will continue to support producers and appreciate his ongoing commitment to seeking farmer input.”

American Feed Industry Association President and CEO Constance Cullman: “As our international counterparts and organizations convene to develop strategies to reduce food

insecurity and environmental impact, we will support Secretary Vilsack in his diplomatic efforts to ensure science-based standards and regulations remain a top priority. Our members are committed to providing expertise and counsel to the USDA delegates charged with ensuring agriculture has a firm footing in 21st century trade agreements.”

National Milk Producers Federation President and CEO Jim Mulhern: “We in the dairy community who have had the opportunity to work with him have seen first-hand his deep passion for rural America and his commitment to advancing agriculture and the communities it serves, from farmers and food-sector workers to the consumers and businesses that depend on USDA to meet their needs every day, in every way. That’s especially important in light of today’s pressing challenges.”

Western Growers President and CEO Dave Puglia: “We are pleased the Senate has confirmed Tom Vilsack as Secretary. Our work with him during his previous service as Secretary yielded positive policy actions for the fresh produce industry,” Puglia explained. “Looking ahead, we must band together to address short term, pandemic-related needs such as funding for worker safety costs, as well as larger and longer-term threats to the viability of farming in the West. Over the next four years, we know Secretary Vilsack will work with us as he has in the past to ensure economic prosperity for America’s family farmers.”

Agricultural Retailers Association President and CEO Daren Coppock: “Secretary Vilsack knows the positive role that agriculture can play addressing climate change through working lands conservation programs, biofuels, agronomic practices and other innovations. ARA’s membership recently adopted its policy positions for the year, and many of our values align as such. We are ready to work together to ensure that the ag retailer’s voice continues to be heard.”

National Council of Farmer Cooperatives President and CEO Chuck Conner: “(Vilsack) will arrive at the U.S. Department of Agriculture facing a series of pressing challenges. In the face of the pandemic and its economic fallout, Secretary Vilsack will need to lead USDA in helping agriculture and rural America to build back more resilient and more equitably than it was before. NCFC and our country’s farmer co-ops look forward to contributing to this difficult task in the years ahead.”

National WIC Association President and CEO Douglas Greenaway: “In his confirmation hearing, Vilsack’s early commitment to expanding access to nutritious foods, reaching out to families in need, making USDA programs more accessible, and addressing systematic racial inequities is a welcome refrain as Vilsack assumes his role overseeing the federal department charged with overseeing the nation’s food supply chain in the midst of a national hunger crisis.”

Growth Energy CEO Emily Skor: “Secretary Vilsack has been a tireless champion of the biofuels industry over the years and understands the important role biofuels should play in our country’s climate change initiatives which the Biden administration has put at the forefront of its agenda.”

Renewable Fuels Association President and CEO Geoff Cooper: “Tom Vilsack is the right leader at the right time for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and he intimately understands that agriculture can and should play a vital role in addressing our world’s most pressing challenges — from food and energy security to climate change and environmental justice.”

Union of Concerned Scientist Food and Environment Program Director Ricardo Salvador: “On day one he faces a series of crises: the pandemic thrusting millions of people into hunger, the climate crisis, the imperative to rebuild rural economies undermined by export-oriented

business models, and a U.S. Department of Agriculture that itself needs rebuilding after being gutted by four years of chaotic and unscientific management.”

Friends of the Earth President Erich Pica: “(Vilsack) must be willing to take on the agribusiness lobby, which has dominated the agency and features prominently on his own resume. He must transform the USDA to support a more diversified, regenerative, healthy, and just food system. He cannot rely on harmful policies like subsidizing biofuels and carbon markets that benefit Big Ag corporations at the expense of communities of color, low-income people, and the planet. He must ensure economic justice for independent and Black, Indigenous, and other farmers of color, protections for food workers, and access to healthy food for every American.”

Food and Water Watch Executive Director Wenonah Hauter: “We can confidently predict what Tom Vilsack’s leadership of the Agriculture Department will look like, because he’s led it before. And the prediction is grim. In his previous stint at USDA, Vilsack backed mass corporate consolidation of our food system at the expense of struggling family farmers. Similarly, he readily advanced industry-driven initiatives allowing companies to inspect their own poultry processing plants, dismantling federal oversight of food and worker safety.”

Chinese demand for ag imports to remain strong for years to come

China is determined to grow more self-sufficient, but the country is also widely expected to remain a growing importer of meat and grains for years to come as the Chinese economy and demand grows, outstripping production capacity, according to economists and new government forecasts.

China’s imports of U.S. agricultural commodities broke records in 2020, and the country may buy even more this year as U.S. farmers and shippers strain to meet the seemingly inexhaustible Chinese demand.

China has been buying so much U.S. soybeans, corn and wheat over the last three months, that the U.S. likely could not handle much more, says Gregg Doud, former chief agricultural negotiator for the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative during the Trump administration and now chief economist for Aimpoint Research.

“We’ve been completely maxed out in what we’re doing now,” he said. “We have really maxed out on our infrastructure in the last few months in what we can sell to China — or to anyone else for that matter.”

U.S. agricultural exports to China suffered greatly at the height of trade wars in 2018 and 2019 as both countries levied tariffs on each other and Chinese buyers sought alternative sources, but 2020 marked a major recovery after the countries reached a detente early in the year.

Now, after disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, the outlook for trade is one of increased business over the next decade. A loss of share in the Chinese market — one reminder of the trade war — will continue to linger, but U.S. farmers are still exporting record amounts.



Jason Hafemeister, USDA

“We are selling into a growing market and so even though we did bounce back last year, we lost a lot of share because a lot of people were selling more than us,” said Jason Hafemeister, USDA’s acting deputy trade undersecretary. “We may not care about share, per se. We care about sales, but this is an important indicator of our competitiveness and market opportunity.”

Nevertheless, new rosy forecasts show the U.S. will have plenty of opportunity to gain back market share in China in the years to come.

“The big point here is that it’s a big market that is having steep growth and there’s potential for continued significant growth in U.S. exports,” Hafemeister said.

The primary reason China is seen as such a big market with expanding demand growth over the next decade is its economy. Even with the COVID-19-related recession, the country is expected to register 1.5% growth in its gross domestic product in 2020. And now, USDA’s economists are predicting 7.1% growth this year before it drops back down to about 5% for the next several years.

“The (Chinese) government would like to double the size of its middle class in 15 years,” said David Dollar, a senior fellow with the Brookings Institution. “There will be an



David Dollar, Brookings Institution

additional 200 million people living in urban areas over the next 15 years, so they still have a period of dynamism where they’ll be growing rapidly ... In this growth environment, it’s quite natural that agricultural imports have been growing. Even though the virus provided a little bit of a disruption at the beginning of 2020, it’s actually quite striking how steady the growth of their agricultural imports are. That’s been a persistent trend and it’s likely to continue. China will be a large and growing agricultural importer.”

That much is clear from the new long-term forecast released by USDA this month. China will import 103.9 million metric tons of soybeans in the 2020-21 marketing year, and that is expected to rise sharply over the next 10 years to 140.5 million tons in 2030-31.

While U.S. farmers are expected to supply some of that increase, much more of it — about 70% of the increase — will come from Brazil, according to USDA economists.

Much of the increased demand for soybeans will come from China’s growing swine herd. The country lost about 40% of its pigs to African swine fever and is rapidly rebuilding the herd. As it does so, the country is moving away from the old way of pork production and converting to large-scale, western style confinement systems that depend far more on manufactured feed instead of swill.

That, says Doud, will help keep demand for soybean and corn imports higher in the years to come.

And pork imports will continue to grow even after China has fully recovered from ASF, say economists like Sharon Sydow, a senior official at USDA’s Office of the Chief Economist.

“Pork production in China will recover, but there are some constraints to how much it can increase,” she said.

China has the demand and the will, but not the resources to be self-sufficient or even close to it.

China’s pork imports have risen sharply over the past couple of years as the country replaced the production it lost due to ASF, but USDA is forecasting those imports to continue rising even after recovery is completed. China imported about 9 million metric tons of pork in 2020, and even though a small dip in purchases is expected this year, imports are expected to rise to about 11 million tons by 2030.

“China is projected to remain the world’s largest meat importer despite reports of the swine herd’s rapid recovery in 2020,” the USDA says in its long-term outlook forecast. “An influx of industrialized livestock farms in China may encounter challenges such as high costs for feed, scarcity of labor and land, costs of manure collection and treatment, needs for production credit, continued disease pressures, and a new ban on antibiotics in animal feed.”

Those kinds of restraints hold true for China’s row crop production too, says Dollar.

“It’s still true that China’s a resource-scarce country,” he said. “It has about 7% of the world’s arable land and about 20% of the world’s population. It’s got serious water shortages in the northern half of the country, which is where about half of the population lives.”

Organic leader hopes for more inclusion on climate change

An organic agriculture leader is hoping diverse scientific perspectives will be part of more high-level USDA discussions about climate change and sustainability in the future.

Laura Batcha, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, served on the “Organic Outlook: Overview of Current Trends and Recent Developments” panel at the Ag Outlook Forum on Friday.

Moderator Mark Lipson of the Molino Creek Farming Collective opened the session’s Q+A by asking Batcha to comment on the emphasis on biotechnology in Thursday’s “Addressing Climate Change and Sustainability through Innovation” discussion, which he said became an “antiscience crusade” that lacked any representation from the organic sector.

“It was a choice to put a provocative pundit on a plenary session,” Batcha said, referring to Jon Entine of the Genetic Literacy Project. She said discussions as important and timely as climate change and sustainability, particularly in front of such a larger audience, need to consider a wide spectrum of scientific research.



Laura Batcha, CEO/Executive Director, Organic Trade Association

“There’s a whole range of views in agriculture,” she told *Agri-Pulse* on Monday, including respected scientists publishing on organic practices. She felt the Thursday participants, who included Tim Bettington of Zoetis and moderator Alison Van Eenennaam, who runs the Animal Genomics and Biotechnology Laboratory at the University of California, Davis, represented a narrow slice of ag innovation.

One perspective should not determine “where science starts and stops,” Batcha said.

For his part on the program, Entine criticized those who try to demonize any one particular technology. “You can’t just say something’s in the sustainable category and something is not,” Entine said, calling the debate over sustainable agriculture “nuanced and complex.”

"I think we've become very siloed, maybe reflecting the partisan sensibility which has infected a lot of our public discussions these days, and we are increasingly debating over means rather than end," Entine said. Different agricultural methodologies "almost have become ideologies," he said, pitting organic and agro-ecological methods against "conventional agriculture, aided by biotechnology."

Entine called that "a false paradigm," saying "we should focus more on the end" results. "Some things are better in the organic farming area and some things are better in the conventional," he said.

USDA’s Office of the Chief Economist, which hosts Ag Outlook, defended its selection of Jon Entine.

“We had him on a panel that included a highly respected scientist and an industry executive,” said Mark Jekanowski, Chairman of the World Agricultural Outlook Board in the OCE, in an email to *Agri-Pulse*. “I think that most people would agree that viewed as a whole, our program covered a wide range of views and was very balanced.”

News Briefs:

Comments sought on biological options for four pesticides. EPA and the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) are seeking comment on two NMFS draft biological opinions on four pesticides. Metolachlor, bromoxynil and prometryn are herbicides used to control grasses and broadleaf weeds, and 1,3-D is a pesticide used in pre-plant fumigation. The draft biological opinions evaluate the impact of these pesticides on 26 federally listed endangered and threatened species of Pacific salmon and steelhead in Washington, Oregon, and California. The draft biological opinions find that registered uses of these pesticides do not jeopardize the listed salmon and steelhead populations or their critical habitats. In addition to the “no jeopardy” findings, the draft biological opinions also describe reasonable and prudent measures (RPMs) to protect the listed species of salmon and steelhead and their critical habitats. [For more information and to comment, click here.](#)

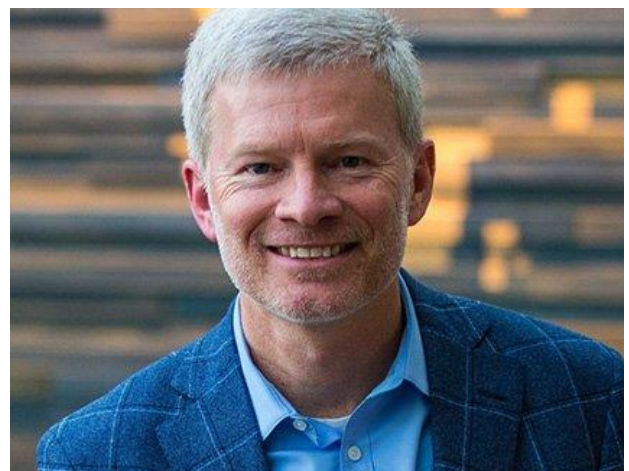
NASS circulating tests ahead of next Census of Ag. Have you received a new mailer from USDA, asking for help on the next census? USDA officials say they're running multiple "content tests" to help improve accuracy in future surveys. If producers have ignored NASS efforts to reach them, they may receive a mailer with the shortest survey the agency has circulated. "It will literally take those who receive it a minute or two to complete," NASS Supervisory Statistician Adam Cline told *Agri-Pulse* in an email. That's because it's basically a yes/no to let NASS know whether the respondent is engaged in farming. "No" respondents won't receive the full survey next year. Farms that have kept in touch with NASS may get other test surveys, which the agency will use to refine 2022 census plans. "Once data collection ends in April, NASS staff will begin analysis of the Content Test results in order to make recommendations for the 2022 Census of Agriculture," Cline said. Cline says one hope for the 2022 Census is that more participants will respond online, which he says will save time and money and reduce errors. The portal now shows users their past data so they can update and change it, rather than reentering from scratch. There is one more data release scheduled from the 2017 Census of Agriculture; 2020 Local Food Marketing Practices will be out in November.

Farm Hands West: Vilsack confirmed to lead USDA

Tom Vilsack is headed back to the Department of Agriculture. The Senate voted 92-7 to confirm Vilsack as the nation's next Secretary of Agriculture, the same post he held during the eight-year Obama administration. To read more on the confirmation, click [here](#).

The Department of Agriculture has tapped **Gloria Montaño Greene** as deputy undersecretary for farm production and conservation and appointed **Zach Ducheneaux** as administrator of the Farm Service Agency. Montaño Greene is a former state executive director for the Farm Service Agency in Arizona, where she served from 2014-2017. She most recently served as deputy director for Chispa Arizona, a program of the League of Conservation Voters focused on empowering Latino voices on issues relating to energy, public lands, and democracy access. Ducheneaux also was executive director of the Intertribal Agriculture Council, the largest Native American agriculture organization in the U.S. He had been with the council since the 1990s in various leadership positions. He also helps operate his family's ranch on the Cheyenne River Sioux Reservation in north-central South Dakota with his brothers.

USDA has also announced the individuals who will hold senior staff positions. **Maribel Duran** was named deputy chief of staff for operations in the Office of the Secretary. Duran most recently served as managing director for equity and inclusion for the Aspen Institute, as well as chief of staff for its leadership division. **Mickeala Carter** has been hired as the deputy director of communications in the office of communications. Carter comes to USDA from Capitol Hill, where she served as director of communications and external affairs for the House Agriculture Committee, working for Chairman **David Scott**, D-Ga. Before that, she was the outreach coordinator for the committee under former Chairman **Collin Peterson**, D-Minn. **Lynn Overmann** now serves as the senior adviser for data and technology in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Administration. Most recently, she served as a senior data strategist for Opportunity Insights. **Bidisha Bhattacharyya** was named senior policy adviser in the Farm Service Agency. Previously, Bhattacharyya served as



Brian Sikes

director for climate and energy policy at the Center for American Progress. **Valerie McMakin** will be a legislative analyst in the Office of Congressional Relations. McMakin recently served as a legislative assistant for Sen. **Jon Tester**, D-Mont., covering the agriculture and food, international trade, and transportation portfolio.

Brian Sikes has been named chief operating officer of Cargill. He will also serve as a management director on the Cargill board of directors. Sikes joined Cargill in 1991, and most recently led the company's global protein and salt enterprise as corporate senior vice president and was Cargill's chief risk officer.

The Department of the Interior has appointed **Daniel Cordalis** deputy solicitor of water; **Nada Culver**, deputy director of policy and programs at the Bureau of Land Management; and **Bryan Newland**, principal deputy assistant secretary of Indian Affairs. Cordalis most recently worked as an attorney with Earthjustice and the Yurok Tribe, and clerked for the Colorado Supreme Court and the Native American Rights Fund. Culver most recently served as the vice president of public lands and senior policy counsel at the National Audubon Society. Before that, Culver was the senior counsel and senior director for policy and planning at The Wilderness Society. Newland is a citizen of the Bay Mills Indian Community, where he recently completed his tenure as tribal president. Before that, Newland served as chief judge of the Bay Mills Tribal Court.

The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee has released the roster for the panel's Republican staff. Joining the committee staff is **Katherine Smith**, who will serve as professional staff for the committee, responsible for environmental review, permitting reform and fish and wildlife policy. She previously served as the chief of staff at the Federal Permitting Improvement Steering Council and was associate director for infrastructure at the Council on Environmental Quality. **Jess Kramer** has also joined the committee staff as counsel working on issues related to clean and safe water and water infrastructure. She previously served as senior policy counsel in the Office of Water at the Environmental Protection Agency and was an assistant attorney general in the Wisconsin Department of Justice's Environmental Protection Unit. To view the full list with the names of the committee staff, click [here](#).



Dana O'Brien

Dana O'Brien has taken on a new role as the chief sustainability officer and deputy chief operating officer at Biotechnology Innovation Organization (BIO). He previously served as the executive vice president for food and agriculture at BIO. **Shaye Mandle** is the incoming chief operating officer. Mandle is a biotech innovation advocate and previously worked at the Medical Alley Association. The National Pork Producers Council (NPPC) has added two staff members to its D.C. office. **Jack Frye** has been hired as the new manager of congressional relations. He most recently managed the National Restaurant Association's federal and state political advocacy programs. **Jack Detiveaux** has joined NPPC as the new manager of competition, labor and tax. He most recently was senior manager of legislative

affairs for the National Association of Chemical Distributors and previously was senior manager of government relations for the American Bakers Association.

Justin Whitmore is now the chief strategy officer at Keurig Dr Pepper. Whitmore previously worked at Tyson Foods as the executive vice president of alternative proteins. Whitmore joined Tyson Foods in 2017 as executive vice president, corporate strategy, and the company's first chief sustainability officer.

The National Potato Council has elected **Dominic LaJoie** to serve as NPC's 2021 president. LaJoie will also head the grower-led organization's executive committee. LaJoie is a fourth-generation potato grower and partner of LaJoie Growers in Maine.

The U.S. Hemp Roundtable has selected its slate of national officers for 2021. **Ola Lessard**, chief marketing officer for HempFusion, has been tapped as president; **Brittani Cushman**, senior vice president, general counsel and secretary of Turning Point Brands Inc., will be the executive vice president; **Pete Meachum**, senior director of government affairs for The Cronos Group, was selected as vice president for federal lobbying; and **Anissa Medina**, regulatory affairs specialist of CV Sciences, will serve as vice president for state lobbying. To see the full slate of officers, click [here](#).

Sanjaya Rajaram, the 2014 World Food Prize Laureate, passed away on Feb. 17. Rajaram was recognized for developing high-yielding and disease-resistant wheat varieties grown on more than 58 million hectares throughout the world. He was born in 1943 near a small farming village in northeastern India and helped his family make a living on their five-hectare farm growing wheat, rice and maize. He won a state scholarship to attend high school and then attended the College of Jaunpur at the University of Gorakhpur, earning a degree in agriculture in 1962. Rajaram's research and field work began at CIMMYT's wheat breeding program in 1969, working alongside Dr. Norman Borlaug in the experimental fields of El Batán, Toluca and Ciudad Obregón in Mexico. In 1972, Borlaug asked Rajaram to succeed him and head up the wheat breeding team at CIMMYT.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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