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Secretary Vilsack borrowing from previous experience as he tackles new priorities at USDA

Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack is probably the most experienced person to ever be one week into the top job at the Department of Agriculture.

However, things have changed so much since January 2017 — when he left USDA headquarters for the last time as secretary — that it might as well be a different universe, much less a different administration.

Now, Vilsack returns to a department — and an industry — in the midst of a pandemic, in the process of recovering from a series of trade skirmishes, and in the grips of lingering questions about long-standing inequalities to a select group of producers.

"I would have never expected this opportunity, but I've known President (Joe) Biden for 30 years plus, and I've never been able to say 'no' to the guy," Vilsack said Tuesday in an exclusive interview with *Agri-Pulse*. "When he called — well, he had to call several times — but eventually, I said 'yes.'"

President Biden and Sec. Vilsack discussed rural issues last year on the campaign trail. Photo by Adam Schultz / Biden for President

And Vilsack has said 'yes' to a lot of things, some of which came across his desk a decade ago. During our interview, he touched on a wide-ranging number of subjects, ranging from helping farmers through the COVID-19 pandemic to addressing the "cumulative effect of discrimination over a long period of time."

Broader, less specific focus on racial inequities

When two former secretaries of agriculture — Dan Glickman and Ann Veneman — sat down in Vilsack's office in 2009, he was expecting guidance on governing USDA's litany of farm programs. Instead, he was met with a warning.

“You’ve got a civil rights problem at USDA,” the two leaders told Vilsack.

The response was to pursue resolution for individualized cases of discrimination, which he said totaled “conservatively, at least 20,000.” Now, Vilsack says he wants USDA to zoom out on that issue and look at the broader, more institutionalized impacts discrimination may have had. He touched on the subject Monday in remarks to the National Farmers Union, where he announced plans to institute an equity commission that will study USDA’s existing programs.

“**I think we’ll take the steps to address what's top of mind now, which is the systemic nature of all of this as opposed to the individual acts, and hopefully we will begin a journey that will not be completed in four years, but will certainly allow us to go further down the road towards a USDA and programs that are available to everyone.”**

Vilsack specifically backed several of the items in the COVID-19 recovery package currently being considered on Capitol Hill, but also said USDA would be open to some items offered up in legislation championed by Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., who recently joined the Senate Ag Committee. Booker has suggested land grants to give Black farmers access to up to 160 acres of land. Vilsack said Tuesday he would be open to considering something along those lines.

“I think there's opportunities for us to take a look at the federal land holdings and determine whether or not any of those might be appropriately available to socially disadvantaged farmers at little or no cost,” he said.

“And in doing so, we bring everybody up, we don't necessarily disadvantage anybody,” Vilsack added. “We respond to the fact that there has been a cumulative effect of inequality and discrimination over the course of years.”

Vilsack also said some of the things in Booker’s legislation — specifically a USDA ombudsman to “hold ourselves accountable” — can be “implemented immediately.”

Budget, workforce in need of a boost

In some ways, Vilsack says USDA’s budgetary and workforce framework has not seen much growth since he first joined USDA in 2009. And he says he plans to change that.

He said his staff is currently in the process of determining whether the existing staffing and funding at the highest levels of the department is sufficient “to meet the challenges that we have.”

“I think we're likely to find that we're going to have to ask Congress to assist us in providing the resources to rebuild, if you will, the department,” he said. “This is not a criticism of the previous administration, this is just a reality.”

He said the staffing in the office of the secretary has been cut nearly in half over the last four years. After a Government Accountability Office report suggested that the way positions were previously funded was not authorized by statute, "the previous administration had to make some difficult choices."

Vilsack said there are a number of vacancies that need to be filled, including between 250-300 at the USDA's Economic Research Service and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Asked about the recent relocation of many ERS and NIFA staff to Kansas City, **Vilsack didn’t**

explicitly state his policy, but said "the worst thing we could do would be to create additional disruption. At this point in time, I think we have to listen and learn." Vilsack will be taking part in a USDA employee town hall on Thursday, but said he would "look at creative ways to fill those vacancies."

He did note the importance of having an undersecretary for rural development — a position that was not filled during the Trump administration.

Climate action to start soon

Vilsack wants to see speedy action from USDA on pursuing climate objectives in production agriculture, including exploring the possibility of a carbon bank funded through the department's Commodity Credit Corp.

But that idea — pushed by many in the industry, including one of his top staffers — needs to be formed with producers in mind, he said.

"We need to make sure that there's clarity about precisely what you need to do to be able to qualify; we need transaction costs that are reasonable," he said. "And at the end of the day we need to make sure that we make the case to the farmer that this is for your benefit. It is not for the benefit of investors or for entities or anybody else.

"Can that be done? I think it can. Is CCC the opportunity to potentially begin that process? I think so," he added. "But I think there's still a lot of work that needs to be done in order to make sure that it's structured right, explained right, and with a sufficient resource to get it started."

Vilsack said there are also existing programs he'd like to leverage to target the broader issue of climate-smart agriculture, but also said he wants to make sure USDA has the resources — both in money and in personnel — to support the effort.

"I think the president's vision of a zero-emission agriculture is the right one, not just for the environment, but because the market, both domestically and internationally, is going to — and is — demanding more and more evidence of sustainability," he said. "And if the U.S. can be the first agriculture to get to net zero, we will have a marketing advantage."

Looking to distribute unused CFAP funds

Vilsack says there is currently billions in funds left to be distributed from previous iterations of the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program, in addition to the funds allocated in a December spending bill.

Additional CFAP funding distribution was frozen in the early days of the Biden administration, and Vilsack says he wants to make sure the remaining moneys are sent in the right direction.

"It's not as if we are purposely delaying; we want to take our time in evaluating how the resources have been allocated," he said.

Thus far, USDA's evaluation of CFAP indicates there was a "significant amount of benefit to a relatively small number of producers and a large benefit to a relatively small percentage of producers. Some producers were left out completely. Some producers received very, very little. Some areas of the supply chain were not helped that needed help," Vilsack explained.

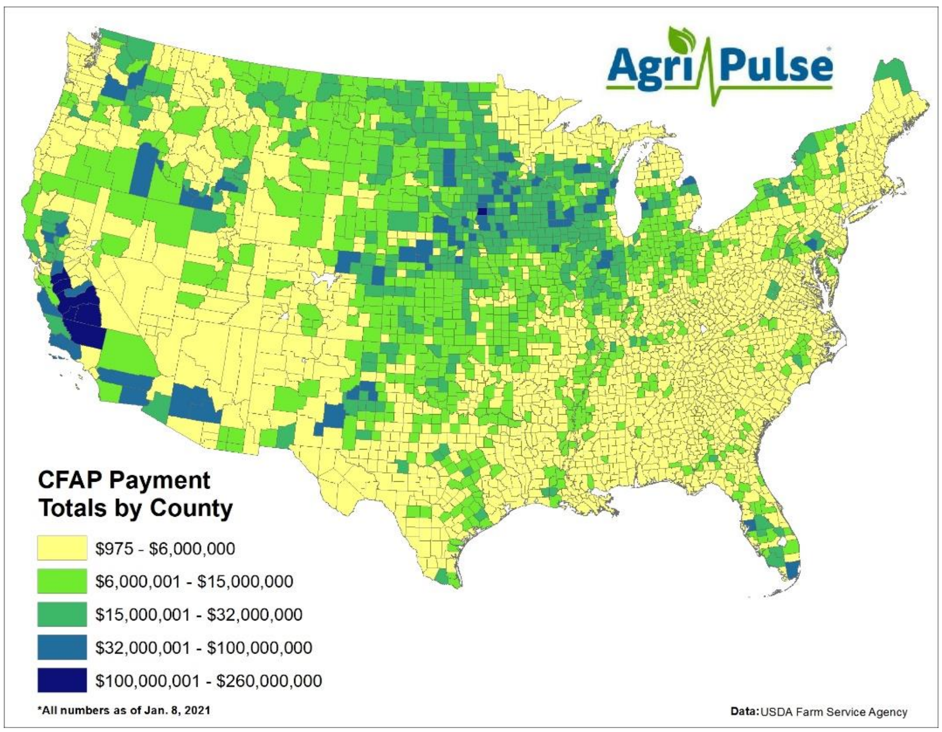
At the end of the assistance programs, Vilsack said he wants to make sure "we've done the very best job at USDA of trying to provide as much help to as many people who are in need as possible." He's hopeful that, with a focus on creating new markets, commodity prices will improve and farmers can transition away from a need for government support.

"Every farmer I've ever talked to would prefer to get the check from the market and not from the government," Vilsack added.

A USDA spokesperson says the frozen funds stem from a January 15 announcement of up to $2.3 billion to top-up payments for hog producers and expand eligibility to pullets and turf grass producers. The funding allocated in December — including $20 per acre payments to row crop producers — remains in the works. The spokesperson said, "policy and logistics for these provisions are currently being developed."

Coronavirus Food Assistance Program: Where did the money go?

When the Trump administration crafted its coronavirus relief payments to farmers, it made sure to get checks to everyone who produced any kind of food or fiber product during the year, from mint, mohair and tobacco to corn and cattle. The pandemic had severely disrupted the farm to fork supply chain — forcing many producers to dump milk, euthanize livestock and poultry and try to find new ways to redirect sales away from restaurants, cafeterias and hotels.



As a result, as many as 900,000 or more individuals or entities in every corner of the country, including Puerto Rico, qualified for CFAP payments that range from as little as a few dollars to $1 million or more, according to an analysis by *Agri-Pulse*.

However, because the payments closely track the value of U.S. agriculture production, the $23.6 billion in Coronavirus Food Assistance Program payments made during 2020 are heavily concentrated among larger farms and in regions of the country with the heaviest ag production.

About 45,000 individuals and entities, or 5% of the total recipients, accounted for more than half the payments, just under $12 billion, according to data provided to *Agri-Pulse* under the Freedom of Information Act. The top 10% of recipients claimed more than 65% of the payments; the bottom 10% shared about $24 million.

Nearly 870 recipients received at least $1 million, led by Texas-based Agrifund LLC, an alternative lender also known as Ag Resource Management that uses government payments to secure farm operating loans and collected $24.1 million in CFAP payments. Farmers are allowed to direct payments to third parties such as Agrifund.

Iowa's Titan Swine was second with $6.6 million. Idaho-based Driscoll Brothers, which produces potatoes, sugar beets, wheat and corn, received just under $4 million.

Download a list of payees receiving at least $100,000 here.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, who took office last week, is already raising concerns about the fairness of the payment distribution, which is under review by the department.

"There was a significant amount of benefit to a relatively small number of producers and a large benefit to a relatively small percentage of producers," he told *Agri-Pulse* in an interview Tuesday. "Some producers were left out completely. Some producers obviously received very, very little."

Nationally, a few farms were ineligible in 2020 despite appeals to the Trump administration. Those producers included contract growers who don't own their livestock or poultry and dairy producers who wanted payments for cows that were culled and sold for beef.

Legislation passed in December made contract growers eligible, and the outgoing Trump administration announced Jan. 15 that they could start applying for payments. Turf grass and pullets also were added to the program, and top-up payments were made available to pork producers. All of those actions are now on hold while the new administration's review is under way.

John Newton, chief economist of the American Farm Bureau Federation, said CFAP payments were designed to address farms of all sizes and types and inevitably concentrated where production is highest.

The payments are based on the value of production, "so there has been a flow toward where production is most concentrated, and I think that's what we see," Newton said.

There was an especially heavy concentration of payments in California's Central and Imperial valleys, regions with prodigious amounts of dairy, fruit, vegetable and nut production that have traditionally received relatively little in the way of direct USDA assistance. The largest farm bill commodity program, Price Loss Coverage, is limited to producers of grain, oilseeds, cotton, peanuts and pulse crops.

Eight of the top 10 counties for CFAP payments are in California, led by Tulare and Fresno counties with $242 million and $234 million respectively. All together, California farms collected nearly $1.8 billion in CFAP, second only to Iowa's $2.1 billion. By comparison, USDA made $1.9 billion in PLC payments in 2019, only $20.5 million of which went to California.

Other top counties for CFAP include Sioux County, Iowa, which has a heavy concentration of hog, chicken, dairy and cattle production and ranks fifth with $129 million in payments. Grant County, Washington, which produces cattle, vegetables, apples and wheat among other commodities, ranks No. 10 with $74 million in payments.

Download a list of the top 100 counties for CFAP payments here.

By comparison, payments through the Trump administration's Market Facilitation Program, which was designed to compensate growers for the impact of retaliatory tariffs, were more concentrated in the South and Midwest. Six of the 10 counties that received the largest payments during the 2019 round of MFP were in Texas or Illinois.

CFAP was delivered in two rounds, starting in June, under eligibility requirements that were expanded to additional commodities as USDA fielded complaints from producers that were initially omitted. Some commodities, including hemp, tobacco and several classes of wheat, were added for the second round of payments that started in September.

Payments were capped at $250,000 per person for both of the two rounds, and there are special rules allowing for larger payments to corporations, limited liability companies, limited partnerships, trusts and estates.

Fresno County dairy producer Steve Maddox, who milks over 3,000 head of cows, said CFAP payments helped compensate producers for the disruptions caused when restaurants, schools and other sites shut down because of government-ordered COVID-19 lockdowns.

Then-Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue announced plans for the program in April 2020, tapping funds in a newly passed, massive COVID aid package, as the industry was reeling from the impact of the supply chain disruptions on commodity markets. Detailed rules for the first round were announced a month later.

Maddox pushed back against critics who say large-scale producers like him shouldn't have gotten any money, saying the payment caps worked to limit the amount of money big farms could receive.

"I didn't get my full amount per cow or per hundred pounds of milk ... but rightfully so," he said.

Kevin Roozing, a banker and farmer in Sioux Center, Iowa, said he firmly believes some farmers would have gone bankrupt without financial relief from USDA.

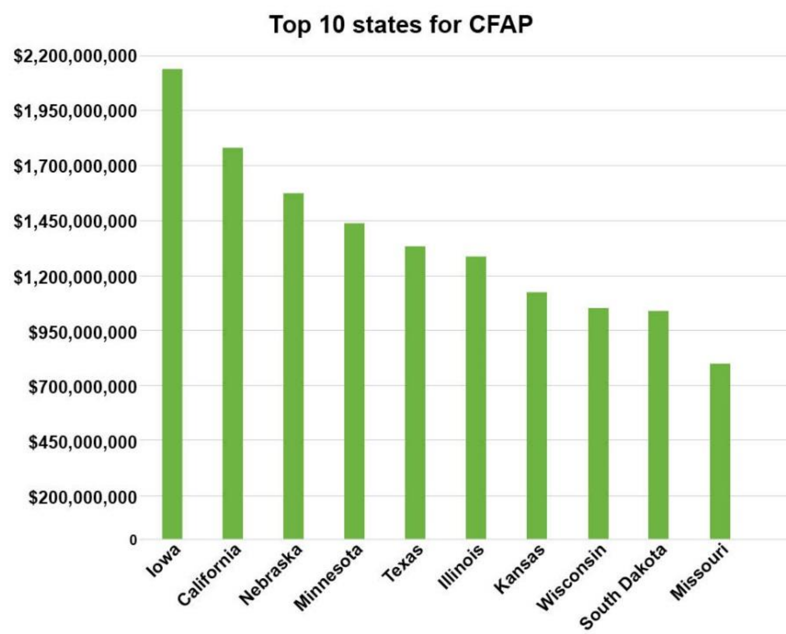
"When we started doing financial statements this fall, I was expecting some problems and most of the guys held it together and did OK. If you started asking them and doing math, it was the CFAP payments that kept a lot of these guys afloat," he noted.

The surge in prices for corn, soybeans and other commodities that started in the last half of 2020 has helped producers, but farmers in his area also are concerned about the upcoming growing season as conditions in the area are very dry, he said.

In Grant County, Washington, cattle and grain producer Ryan Poe said he probably would have lost money in 2020 without CFAP, even though his winter wheat crop wasn't eligible for payments during the program's first round. Poe, who also produces canola, said the CFAP payment helped pay for the crop inputs for this year's crops.

"Coming out of the harvest, our farm wasn't all that impressive of a harvest, and just struggling with everything up to that point, it definitely was a big relief for us for that payment to come through," said Poe.

Other areas that benefited heavily from CFAP included Weld County, Colorado, ($59.2 million) home to giant JBS beef packing plant in Greeley and one of the largest concentrations of cattle feeding in the world; and such dairy-heavy counties as Stearns, Minnesota ($65.2 million), Dane, Wisconsin ($53 million) and Lancaster, Pennsylvania. ($52 million).



Also illustrative of how widely money was distributed under CFAP is Santa Barbara County, California, best known for its spectacular coastline but also a major producer of vegetables, leafy greens and grapes. The county's farms received $48.2 million in CFAP payments. By comparison, the county received just $854,000 in government farm payments while producing $1.5 billion worth of crops in 2017, according to the USDA ag census.

Up the coast, Monterey County ($4.2 billion in ag production and $1.3 million in government payments in 2017) received $46.6 million in CFAP payments.

It is difficult to tell from USDA the exact number of people who received payments or the commodities on which they received payments. Individual producers can receive payments under their own names or through entities such as companies or partnerships.

As with conventional commodity programs and crop insurance, farmers had to be in compliance with conservation requirements for highly erodible land and wetlands to be eligible for CFAP. Recipients couldn't have adjusted gross incomes exceeding an average of $900,000 unless 75% of their adjusted gross income came from farming, ranching or forestry.

USDA's Farm Service Agency declined to release the type of commodity on which producers qualified for payments, saying that could disclose confidential business information. FSA said making public the type of commodity along with payment details "would give insight into the type and scope of farming operations."

The agency said the data was current as of Jan. 8. The *Agri-Pulse* map did not include Alaska, Hawaii and Puerto Rico. A few payments continue to be made under the second round of the program.

After CARB's ban on ag burning, focus shifts to Newsom for incentives funding

In a unanimous decision, the Air Resources Board (CARB) last week approved a plan to phase out all open agricultural burning by 2025 in the San Joaquin Valley. Since the Air Pollution Control District in the valley advanced the plan to the board in November, farmers and industry groups have been putting pressure on CARB and the Newsom administration to increase the amount of incentives funding that supports alternatives to open burning. CARB members have now added their support as well.

“We're negotiating and waiting for finality. But the governor can actually reduce this in major ways if he would just put the funding into the May Revise to end this practice once and for all,” said board member Dean Florez, encouraging Gov. Gavin Newsom to be “hyper focused” on incentives as he refines his state budget proposal.

Almond and wine grape growers lobbied especially hard against the ban and were met by a force of environmental advocates—including the Sierra Club of California—who called for an immediate ban rather than the phased approach. They pointed to the initial legislation aiming to end the practice, presented as Senate Bill 705 in 2003 by Florez when he was a state senator. It provided exemptions when alternatives were economically infeasible. Florez detailed how challenging it was to gather support for the measure, which was part of a large package to clean up air in the state, and said he believed at the time the exemptions were key to passage. It cost him relationships with ag representatives who are still engaged on the issue today.

“I don't think we spoke for about 10 years, maybe even a decade, with a lot of hard feelings about that,” he said. “It was a hard deal for agriculture to come into the clean air realm.”

Alternatives remain overly expensive and are too early in development for many growers.

“**If we lose the ability to use flame cultivation in a timely fashion, it will make it impossible to farm organically,”** said almond grower Steve Koretoff in his testimony to the board. “We cannot allow weeds to get out of control. If the harvest gets caught in the overgrown weeds, it can cause a loss of crop and create habitat for pests that attack the almond orchard, and also for food safety issues.”

Outdoor burning

The costs for alternatives to burning will add as much as $2,000 per acre to vineyard operations, said Fresno County Farm Bureau CEO Ryan Jacobsen. This would hurt California farmers who must compete worldwide as “price takers not price makers.”

Almond grower Daniel Bass has invested more than 30 years in collaborating with manufacturers to come up with shredders that could work in their orchards.

“It does take time to develop that technology,” he said. “Try not to take tools out of our toolbox, like burning, before we have viable alternatives.”

Small farmers like Stan Chance say they cannot afford to pay $1 million for chipping and grinding equipment to incorporate agricultural waste into the soil as mulch. He said the

issue is further exacerbated by market demands. Private contractors will prioritize 100 acres over 10.

"It's easy math: $100,000, or he can come to my place for $10,000," said Chance.

Another almond grower, Jenny Holtermann, said small, targeted burns can be much more effective. The lingering wildfire smoke last year put her burns on hold for five months until the district allowed burning again. Holtermann added that shredders will contribute more fossil fuel emissions in the valley and strain rural roads with so many contractors continually shifting across small parcels. She said this would also not solve the problem of diseased wood that cannot be reincorporated into the soil.

Yet the concerns for air quality outweighed those from farmers. In her first major public hearing as the newly appointed CARB chair, Liane Randolph separated herself from her predecessor Mary Nichols by framing the issue around communities of color.

"**My goal at CARB going forward is to always check ourselves and make sure we are considering how our decisions as a board look at ways to address both the current and historic challenges that have been applied inequitably, and that the opportunities we create prioritize those who've been shouldering those challenges, particularly people of color," said Randolph.**

In presenting the framework plan for banning burning to the board, Samir Sheikh, who directs the air district, called it "very bold" and aggressive and the first ban of its kind in the country. Sheikh also recognized how public-private partnerships have accelerated the transition away from burning.

CARB board member Dean Florez

Western Agricultural Processors Association CEO Roger Isom emphasized this when countering arguments from environmental advocates that the industry has done little since SB 705 was passed.

"**Every single time that EPA, CARB and the air district have come to us to reduce emissions, we have done just that," said Isom. "We have been looking under every single rock to try to find solutions**."

He noted the role of farmers in adopting more than 100 conservation management practices to help the valley be the first area in the country to reach federal attainment standards for fine particulate matter. The region also "blew out of the water" goals for nitrogen oxide reductions. But alternatives won't happen overnight, Isom cautioned, as he asked for CARB's support in finding incentives funding.

Dani Diele, a policy advocate for the Agricultural Council of California, said the industry has proven that incentive dollars matched with private investment can go a long way to reduce ag burning.

“**California is on the forefront of creating the loftiest environmental goals in the world,” said Diele. “Because of this ambitious mindset, it is imperative the state continue to invest in environmentally transformational practices.”**

Through a pilot project launched in 2018, the air district has allocated $25 million in grants and launched a bioenergy collaborative to search for alternatives. Manuel Cunha, president of the Nisei Farmers League, said the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service has committed to work with the industry and district to put $20 million a year toward alternatives in the valley. A report to the board notes that as much as $30 million annually will be needed to further support the transition.

“There is going to be not only a major incremental cost of some of these practices, but the need to develop some major infrastructure as well,” said Sheikh. “There's going to be a wide variety of things that are going to need to happen to really handle the volume of material that we're talking about today.”

Diele argued the additional dollars cannot come from existing programs for healthy soils and greenhouse gas reduction and pointed to California’s Low-Carbon Fuel Standard as one option. The Bioenergy Association of California stressed the agricultural residue is a resource and should not be looked at as a waste material. It can be converted to biochar for permanent carbon sequestration and carbon-negative energy, said a policy advocate. This could replace diesel and backup generators and be used in heavy duty trucks where no zero-emission options exist.

Anticipating the board’s decision, several farm groups said they looked forward to working with the air district over the next six months as it develops a strategy for implementing the plan. Robert Spiegel, a policy advocate for the California Farm Bureau, pledged support for the resolution but said the solutions will require further dialogue.

Others appreciated the four-year phased approach. Bradley Kalebjian, who represents an orchard and vineyard removal business in Madera and Fresno Counties, said this additional time will allow further development of simpler technologies than bioenergy, such as air curtain burners.

While a couple environmental activists called the practice of ag burning ancient and labeled farmers as greedy for contributing to some of the worst air quality in the country, the Environmental Defense Fund recognized that farming plays an important role in the local economy and growers will need resources to adjust to the ban. Board member Tania Pacheco-Werner similarly said California must give the industry real tools to stop burning. The board’s agriculture member, John Eisenhut, also encouraged the air district to further support the industry by not adopting a higher fee structure to disincentivize burning.

Several board members also echoed comments from advocates in pushing for a better public notification system for those burns that are still permitted over the next 36 months. This included board member Diane Takvorian, who added that she was also not confident the industry will actually come into

Asm. Eduardo Garcia, D-Coachella

compliance by the 2025 deadline. Pacheco-Werner pushed back on adding further monitoring, saying the state should instead prioritize its resources on ending burning.

Assemblymember Eduardo Garcia, the legislative member of the board, however, recognized that environmental justice advocates in his Coachella district had been calling for this as well and suggested introducing a bill for statewide monitoring. CARB Executive Director Richard Corey beat him to it, saying he is already working on a regulatory pathway for statewide monitoring and will soon present his proposal to the board.

While Corey pointed out that the plan approved by the board does not actually require incentives to be in place for the air district to implement the measures, he recognized the need for further dialogue.

“We have a tremendous amount of work to do over the next six months,” said Corey.

State dollars may help ag, but new regulatory proposals get more attention

The Newsom administration has proposed new programs that could ease reporting requirements for farmers, help farmers adapt to emerging drought conditions and provide technical assistance to disadvantaged farmers. But administration officials have faced skepticism from lawmakers in recent legislative budget hearings as well as strong opposition from the industry over a costly increase to fees levied on pesticide sales.

“There's regulations on top of regulations on top of regulations,” said Republican Senator Brian Dahle (above), who also runs a seed and trucking business in Lassen County, during a budget subcommittee hearing last week. “I need more detail on how you're going to make it easier for me to stay a family farm in California.”

Sen. Mike McGuire, D-Healdsburg

Dahle was specifically discussing a proposal to streamline regulatory reporting for farmers into a central hub from across various programs in CalEPA and at CDFA. Dahle pointed to the state government’s abysmal track record on solving IT problems, particularly with billions lost to fraud recently at the employment department. The nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office (LAO) recommended lawmakers reject the administration’s proposal, arguing that while it has merit in relieving burdens to agriculture, it does not offer enough broader public benefit to warrant $6 million in taxpayer funding. Dahle worried about escalating costs as well.

CDFA Secretary Karen Ross defended the proposal, arguing it would “improve our customer service and make life a little bit easier for the agricultural communities of the state,” especially for small farmers and ranchers. Ross said the State Water Resources Control Board is eager to work with CDFA on a preliminary assessment of the needs, as the agency balances regulatory monitoring for the Irrigated Lands and CV-SALTs programs, among others.

The administration is also pledging support to farmers through a low-interest loan program for emerging green technologies, known at the Climate Catalyst Fund, which would be run out of the governor's business office. But the idea has come under fire for proposing to fund climate-smart projects like dairy digesters and alternative manure management practices through loans rather than the incentives grants that lawmakers had approved through negotiations with the Jerry Brown administration and agricultural interests.

The Newsom administration first proposed the fund in early 2020, but mostly abandoned it as the pandemic created new budget uncertainty. The proposal this year has been scaled down from $1 billion to just $50 million aimed at ag programs and, in a separate proposal, another $49 million for wildfire resilience programs. Sen. Mike McGuire of the North Coast pointed out the funding for agriculture is less than half of what the Brown administration provided the methane reduction grant programs in the first year alone. He called it a broken commitment to dairy farmers in his region.

"[The Newsom administration is] trying to sell [the Climate Catalyst Fund] like this is the best new thing for [farmers]," said McGuire. "This state promised small family dairy farmers that we're going to help them transition to be able to beat climate change."

He argued the administration did not consult with farmers in his region ahead of time.

"It's incredibly frustrating and a bit tone deaf," added McGuire.

California Farm Bureau policy advocate Taylor Roschen urged the lawmakers to consider standalone money for the methane reduction programs, arguing that dairy and livestock ranchers cannot overextend themselves with more loans.

The administration is also seeking to backfill incentives grants for on-farm water efficiency projects that were lost during the pandemic, with $40 million split between the current budget and the next cycle beginning in July. LAO recommended holding off on the proposed early allocation, which gained pushback from lawmakers.

"We're broken right now as an economy, and speed is going to be our friend," said Sen. Henry Stern of Canoga Park. "If we need to get farmers back on their feet or prepared for this drought season right now, that's what I'm most worried about."

Stern said this money could help farmers adapt to the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act. The early action would allow groundwater recharge projects to be completed before next winter's rains, according to Ross.

The administration also gathered broad support for a $6 million proposal on technical assistance grants for socially disadvantaged farmers, which make up 20% of all farmers in the state under the USDA Ag Census.

Lawmakers applauded a second year of funding support to help CDFA-affiliated fairs cover the cost of layoffs as fairgrounds shuttered during the pandemic and lost event revenues. The proposal includes $60 million in total, with an additional $20 million left unspent from last year. Yet McGuire pointed out that "all fairs have cratered," not just the ones the state is obligated to bail out. Numerous advocates pressed for county fairs to be included in the funding.

The greatest frustrations during hearings on the budgets for CDFA and the Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) have been directed at a proposal to replace the flat-fee mill assessment with a tiered structure based on risk assessment. It would derive an estimated $45 million annually in revenue by taxing sales of crop protection tools.

LAO said the proposal should be more aggressive, phasing it in faster and with higher fees, which has gained support among some liberal lawmakers.

Dahle, however, wanted to grant DPR the $8 million request in the proposal to cover the department's structural deficit but called the assessment overhaul misguided.
"It's the wrong time to have this conversation," said Dahle. "We're in a pandemic. We're asking people to use these things to stay safe. And at this time, we're going to change the whole concept of how we regulate and tax these products?"

He pointed to a bottle of hand sanitizer next to McGuire, which he said is considered a toxic pesticide and would be subject to this "pandemic tax," as an unintended consequence of the proposal. Dahle added that it penalizes the farmer who must rely on pesticides, while illegal pot growers in national forests are destroying wildlife and ecosystems through uncontrolled pesticide use.

DPR Director Val Dolcini recognized the cannabis issue as the responsibility of county sheriff departments and defended the mill proposal as being a reflection of the industry's efforts to reduce pesticide use.

"The more dangerous, more toxic pesticides, like fumigants and organophosphates and others, are going down," said Dolcini, referring to usage trends. "What we hope to do with this proposal is accelerate that transition."

Michael Miiller, director of government relations for the California Association of Winegrape Growers, called the approach unworkable, especially at a time of historic losses in the industry due to the pandemic and wildfires. Representing the Western Plant Health Association, Louie Brown pointed out that DPR's budget has grown 15% over the last five years and the assessment revenues and related funding would provide another 40% increase. Chemical manufacturing groups, meanwhile, opposed the provision because it would deter existing efforts to create more sustainable products.

Roschen said it represents a significant policy and financial shift and even organic producers would struggle with higher, unavoidable production costs.

One year later: COVID-19 and its rural broadband impact

This story is the first in a series that will run in Agri-Pulse *this month exploring how various facets of the food and agriculture industries adjusted to the COVID-19 pandemic.*

Since COVID-19 soared across the U.S. a year ago, it seems Congress and government agencies, a host of companies, organizations, and telecommunication providers themselves have thrown everything but the kitchen sink at extending broadband internet service to more rural homes, farms, schools, hospitals, and others lacking good internet service.

"The pandemic highlighted the need and the size of the digital divide," says Mary Winn Pilkington, senior vice president of Tractor Supply Company, echoing a common assessment of the 2020 rural broadband arena.

TSC, for example, bought 3,000 Chromebooks for homebound children of their employees newly going to school online, and then joined the American Connection Project Broadband Coalition (ACPBC), an initiative launched last July by Land O'Lakes and now a club of over 140 companies and organizations committed to promoting broadband across the countryside.

TSC, in fact, also quickly took a lead in that coalition's kickoff project, the American Connection Project. "We invested in chain-wide upgrade of store Wi-Fi and deployment of Theatro digital communicators to all stores," retooling devices for faster speeds, plus "additional wireless access-points to enhance Wi-Fi coverage in parking lots, side lot, curbside, and throughout the stores," Pilkington said. **By late February, she said, TSC was providing free Wi-Fi to all visitors, including vehicles parked near 1,400 of its 1,900 locations in 49 states, and over 1.4 million visitors had used the free service.**

Mary Wynn Pilkington, Tractor Supply Company

By recent count, the project participants offer free Wi-Fi at nearly 3,000 sites nationally, found on this Land O'Lakes map.

In a sort of parallel action last spring and summer, about 800 telecommunications and internet providers took the Keep Americans Connected Pledge, initiated by the FCC, to waive late fees and not terminate service because of an inability to pay during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, in the summer of 2022 Microsoft will wrap up its five-year Airband Initiative, partnering with telecommunications and internet providers, equipment makers, or others to "bring together private-sector capital investment in new technologies with public-sector financial and regulatory support" to advance rural broadband.

Along with enabling internet technology itself, Microsoft tasked its Airband initiative with bringing broadband to the homes of 3 million Americans by mid-2022.

"Right now, we're over 2 million," Vickie Robinson, Airband's general manager, told *Agri-Pulse*, and she reports Airband has had projects expanding broadband in 26 states and Puerto Rico.

Then, last summer, Microsoft and Land O'Lakes announced a strategic alliance, a multiyear joint initiative to pioneer innovations and big-data applications and precision agriculture on farms and, generally, to help close the rural broadband gap.

Robinson says the two companies "are very aligned from a mission perspective. We both see the need to empower rural America, unleash the power of technology … (and) enable farmers for more productive and sustainable farming. It requires you have broadband in the first instance."

That alliance's first two projects have Ohio-based Watch Communications installing wireless high-speed service to two farms that are members of Co-Alliance in Indiana and Sunrise Cooperative in Ohio, Robinson says. But the systems Watch installs will deliver wireless broadband in a sweeping radius around the targeted farms, serving about 9,000 residents, she says.

From the Land O'Lakes perspective, CEO Beth Ford says the alliance aims "to bring farmers data-based, precision agriculture tools and … help a farmer make more predictable and precise decisions on every acre."

The American Connection's nationwide splash of free Wi-Fi reflects perhaps the country's newfound love for rural broadband, which swelled on Capitol Hill last March with Congress' first big pandemic relief package, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act. It included $125 million for USDA's ReConnect Pilot Program and Distance Learning, Telemedicine, and Broadband Program plus $200 million for the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to boost expansion of telehealth services. In fact, Congress had already funneled $1.45 billion into the ReConnect program in FY2019 and FY2020 on top of $600 million it had mandated in FY 2018.

Lawmakers' biggest long-term push for rural service recently, however, is the Rural Digital Opportunity Fund (RDOF), a $20.4 billion authorization from which the FCC announced initial awards of $9.2 billion in December. It provides subsidies helping internet providers extend broadband to unserved rural locations through the decade ahead.

Congress also recently allotted $65 million for the FCC to vastly improve the mapping it uses to determine which Census blocks are without internet service and thus eligible for FCC incentive dollars to deliver broadband. Many rural broadband advocates have pleaded for years for more accurate, detailed mapping and, with the cash now available, the FCC created a task force in February to do the job.

On tap from the FCC: $50 monthly credits low-income consumers can use to reduce monthly internet service fees. Congress approved the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program in January, and Acting FCC Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel's recent advisory says she expects implementation soon, available to households already qualified for USDA nutrition or other economic aid.

Also possible is a new Emergency Connectivity Fund House Democrats recently put in a budget bill at $7.6 billion to further help schools and public libraries pay for internet service, Wi-Fi hot spots, modems, and routers, and digital devices for students and teachers.

Bolstered with tons of federal dollars and promised funds, 2020 investment and expansion by internet services providers shot to a four-year high of **$**29.1 billion nationally last year, the wireless industry reports.

"Needless to say, all networks were pushed to their capacity …(when) most of us locked down during the pandemic," said Claude Aiken, president of the Wireless Internet Service Providers (WISPA), representing about 800 mostly small and rural internet services. "Americans used the fullest extent of their internet access to teach our kids at home, telework, communicate with loved ones and friends, and generally keep their heads above the water."

Mike Wendy, WISPA communications director, says members saw downloading demand jump 43% overall from March into summer, and uploading demand soared 70% already last spring and has remained at least that high. The response: within weeks of COVID-19's alarm bells, 82% of operators responding to a WISPA members survey were upgrading their networks while they expanded staff by 20% overall to meet the demands.

But FCC delivered more than cash. **Wendy said the agency has been opening up parts of the 5.9 GHz and 3.5 GHz spectra of the radio band for various unlicensed and licensed use by internet services, plus selling bits of spectrum access**. Those moves vastly improved wireless providers' access to customers, reduced interference in crowded broadcast frequencies, allowed internet providers to increase their capacity and often their reach, and more, he said.

Schools and America's students were top beneficiaries of the tidal wave of new investment, service expansion, and new radio spectrum access.

Shirley Bloomfield, NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association

"Our companies reached out to their local school's superintendent or school district … and said, 'work with us to figure out who the kids are who've got connectivity, who doesn't' … and in a lot of cases literally went out and connected the kids who didn't have connectivity," said Shirley Bloomfield, CEO of NTCA: The Rural Broadband Association, which represents small, rural providers.

Many rural electric co-ops, while their teams scrambled to expand service to schools last year, set up temporary Wi-Fi hot spots in or near strategically positioned school buses for students to do their homework, noted Stephen Bell, media director for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA). The hot spots were one of a flurry of efforts (highlighted in a NRECA video) that rural power co-ops launched early in the pandemic to help schools and rural communities counter the pandemic.

The electric co-ops began a decade ago to include fiber when new power distribution cable was laid, and NRECA president Jim Matheson says 150 of its 834 power distribution co-ops so far provide high-speed internet service to members. What's more, NRECA says its members won about 150 of the FCC's preliminary RDOF project awards, so more of them will weave in fiber internet service in upcoming years.

A Pew Charitable Trusts survey found 12 states used CARES Act funds last year to quickly "help families with K-12 students at home purchase internet-enabled devices, wireless hot spots, or both." Ohio, for example, did that with $50 million in CARES Act cash. **Pew also estimates 37% of rural students (based on 2018 census data) "do not have adequate internet access or digital devices at home to support online learning," though the percentage has likely risen in the past three years.**

How many American adults and students are still without access to broadband service?

Guesstimates remain all over the chart. The FCC's latest estimate, from 2019, is just 14.5 million, but that's based on maps that often don't cover big parts of rural Census blocks.

A study by BroadbandNow, which tried to fill in the isolated areas FCC maps miss, estimated 42 million Americans lack internet access this year. Pew Research, meanwhile, reported a fourth of Americans don't use broadband at home. And Microsoft's analysis estimated about 157.3 million U.S. residents (nearly half the population) in late 2019 did not use the internet at broadband speeds.

"The problem is, there is no systematic way (to know), to date, until the FCC starts (improving) maps," NTCA's Bloomfield said. "I worry when people race to stick a number on it."

“First, how do we define broadband?” she asks, and advises that the FCC’s minimum service level to qualify for subsidies — 25 megabits download and 3 megabits upload — “is a pretty low standard,” given swelling user demands.

Vickie Robinson, Microsoft

On the other hand, WISPA’s Wendy calls 25/3 service “tremendously powerful” in terms of capacity needed by the average American household.

Microsoft’s Robinson calls 25/3 service “a good place to start,” and “a baseline … that allows a family of four (as in her own home) … to all do what we’re supposed to do.”

All three, meanwhile, expect the FCC will soon raise that minimum capacity required for FCC subsidies substantially, perhaps to 100/20 Mbps or more, in part because of the explosion in demand brought by the pandemic.

But the other thing, Bloomfield says, is affordability, which is the main reason many rural people aren't connected.

For Microsoft’s Airband, affordability for both service and devices is the top issue clarified by the pandemic, said Robinson. “We can’t tackle just the issue of broadband access; we also need to address the issue of affordability,” she says.

She and Bloomfield both expect the $50-a-month credit (and $100 credit for some devices) for low-income folks will help when those still without connectivity are offered service.

USDA examining future of food boxes

The Department of Agriculture is reviewing whether and how to continue the Farmers to Families Food Box program, as the effort begins to wind down after serving a critical — but often criticized — role during the still continuing food crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The program, which has received close to $6 billion in funding, has resulted in delivery of more than 140 million boxes of produce, milk, other dairy items and meat since it was launched by previous Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue in May. It is ending April 30, but USDA’s Agricultural Marketing Service is looking at what form it might take after that date.

“We are phasing those down, but we want to take some lessons forward to (The Emergency Food Assistance Program),” Stacy Dean, USDA's new deputy undersecretary for food, nutrition and consumer services, said in a presentation to the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture’s winter policy conference last week.

“We have to address this not just [from a] food insecurity perspective, but also a nutrition insecurity perspective,” Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack said in a conversation with reporters last week. **“To the extent that a food box program and other programs at USDA could encourage and enhance the capacity of people that have access to nutritious, healthy food, that’s something we obviously need to think about continuing and looking at.”**

But Vilsack and others who have been involved with and reviewing the program say improvements can definitely be made.

"The implementation of this program highlighted in some cases, circumstances and situations where perhaps the level of money paid for those who were putting the boxes together was pretty significant," Vilsack noted. He said it's important to review how the program could be made more efficient so "the vast majority of the resources are not going for the administration of the program, but are actually going for the purchasing of the items that go in the boxes and getting as much food good, nutritious food to people as possible."

Carrie Calvert, Feeding America

"Having distributors determine who received the food has led to a lot of confusion and duplication on the ground," said Carrie Calvert, vice president, government relations, agriculture & nutrition at Feeding America. Her group, which has 200 member food banks, wants to see USDA, not distributors who received the contracts, take the lead role on deciding where food will go.

"USDA, with that broader view of where the food is going, will be able to ensure that areas of the country have equitable access to it," she said.

Under the program, Calvert said there have been situations where "there could be oversaturation in one specific area, because maybe a distributor doesn't realize that another distributor is delivering in that community." But in many other cases, the leeway given to distributors has resulted in not enough boxes for the coverage area.

A report released last month by Harvard Law School's Food Law and Policy Clinic (FLPC) and the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition found more than 1,000 counties received no food boxes in May and June, and two states — Maine and Alaska — were left out of the first round completely.

"A more equitably designed program that also is more efficient and effective to distribute the food could be helpful in our broader work to address the on-average 55% increase in demand we're seeing," Calvert said. But she added that other changes are needed, such as the 15% increase in SNAP benefits that has been extended through June 30 and expansion of programs to get school lunches to children in need.

The program appears to have broad support among state agriculture agencies. A survey of state agencies in the Northeast found 64% support for the program, with 36% saying it would be "better as part of existing programs, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program should be a priority."

"Undoubtedly, our agricultural industry and food insecure individuals throughout our region saw tremendous benefit from the Farmers to Families Food Box program," a group of 13 state ag agency leaders from Maine to North Carolina said in a Jan. 12 letter to Perdue including recommendations to improve the program.

Some in the food bank community, however, believe increasing availability and benefits in the SNAP program is he way to go. "First and foremost, at the food bank, we feel like the SNAP program is a much better way to serve people than the food box program," said Vermont Food Bank CEO John Sayles.

"Extending access to SNAP, increasing SNAP benefit amounts, and reducing the restrictions on how SNAP dollars can be spent on food (for example, allowing purchase of prepared and hot foods) is more dignified and will better meet a family's needs than a prepackaged box only available at limited times and limited locations," the food bank said in comments to USDA.

In addition, in the five rounds of the program, "Vermont has had five different vendors," VFB said. "Each time we get a new vendor it means we have to go back to the drawing board, which has proven to be an inefficient way of spending time and resources."

Dean agreed transparency around the boxes' destinations is necessary. "There wasn't a lot of coordination with states," she told NASDA. "That is something we would need to improve on."

Industry groups have been supportive of the program. "We are in favor of keeping the program running," says Robert Guenther, senior vice president for public policy at United Fresh Produce Association. "Food insecurity continues to be a major challenge, so this program, for all the challenges that people want to highlight, still has served a very important purpose."

"It's worked incredibly well," Guenther said, praising USDA for "standing up a program of this dimension in such a short order of time."

The National Milk Producers Federation supports "continued food distribution to help the millions of families struggling with the pandemic's economic effects," NMPF CEO Jim Mulhern said in a statement provided to *Agri-Pulse*. "Whether it's through food boxes or other approaches that directly assist food banks, we would support whichever methods are the most efficient and effective."

Regardless of how USDA decides to go, "dairy will be a crucial part of providing much-needed nutrition," but there needs to be "an appropriate mix of dairy products," Mulhern said. **"Last year, there were some unintended consequences for dairy markets created when USDA focused on cheese over other dairy products. A more balanced approach would avoid that situation and better serve families in need."**


Jim Mulhern, NMPF

A major issue revolves around the types of boxes being distributed. As the program has progressed, it has moved from offering boxes with one type of commodity — frozen meats, produce, or dairy — to combination boxes.

But that has created food safety problems. "We've heard from our network that there are a lot of food safety and food storage concerns with having combo boxes, because produce, dairy and frozen meat all need to be stored at different temperatures," Calvert said. "Operationally, it's hard to require foods that have different storage and temperature requirements, combined together to be distributed. It's just not very efficient that way."

Guenther also said that the program worked best when boxes contained specific commodities. **"When they went to combo boxes, that's when things started getting very difficult, so to speak," he said. With combo boxes, less produce was needed, which made it**

difficult for produce distributors that may have had contracts, because to participate, "you had to find a dairy source and a meat source, and there weren't a lot of cross-purpose companies that were able to do that."

The Harvard/NSAC report included similar critiques, finding that after criticism of the high cost of food boxes in early rounds, USDA shifted to making price the sole criterion.

"However, this sole focus on price swung too far in the other direction," the report said. "Most governmental procurement and other USDA programs today take into account other societal values including racial equity, geographical preference, environmental sustainability, and other goals."

Along with USDA's increased focus on "maximizing the number of boxes distributed, the program shifted away from its original goals of addressing food waste and supporting the livelihoods of smaller producers, meaning the sole focus on the prices was not the best solution," the report said.

Pandemic fuels spike, sustained growth in organic sales

Amid the panic-buying that characterized the earliest weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic, some organic producers found innovative ways to make the sudden switch away from restaurants and into retail sales. One year later, organic growers report that some products are still flying off the shelves.

Adele Gemignani, head of sales and development at Coke Farms in San Juan Bautista, California, remembers clearly March 11, 2020, the day the World Health Organization declare the global pandemic.

"We sold out of pretty much everything we had," she said, as customers were trying to "fill trucks with products because they knew there was a shutdown coming and we didn't know how it would affect us."

Turns out, pandemic-era shoppers often choose organic.

Coke Farms saw solid sales of popular produce items like fennel and cilantro after the pandemic pivot away from food service.

Gemignani said a few specialty products that didn't translate quickly to home use, like sunchokes (Jerusalem artichokes) and frisée (curly endive), suffered. But common foods did well as people adjusted to cooking at home. California is the nation's top state for organic production and Gemignani said Coke Farms benefited from having a customer base that allowed for shifting deliveries to retailers when institutions like schools and hotels closed. After the initial shock, she said some growers were able to replace plans to grow radicchio and frisée with cilantro, fennel and other herbs "that sell well in the retail sector."

"That category kind of exploded this past year," said Matt Seeley, CEO and executive director of the Organic Produce Network,

about herbs for home cooking. Other ingredients including turmeric and ginger also "really had a strong uptick."

After initial supply-chain glitches, Shenandoah Growers saw sustained high demand for its six top selling cut herbs, said vice president Don Helms. The Rockingham, Virginia-based company focuses on nationwide retail sales at major supermarkets. While the clamshell packages of mint, parsley, cilantro, rosemary, thyme and basil were hot sellers, stores struggled to get potted living herbs out to the public and those sales slumped. Helms said Shenandoah has changed how they supply the potted herbs to make it easier for stores this spring when shoppers are looking for living plants.

"We actually send a corrugated display that all the plants are already on," he said, which means store employees only have to unwrap it and put it out.

Organic industry watchers are cautious about claiming increased sales are here to stay, but Helms said for Shenandoah, demand remains high and "the volume seems to be pretty sticky."

Laura Batcha, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, said after the 42% organic sales spike in March, grocery shoppers continued to buy organic produce, if not in quite such a frenzy.

"You're seeing a good portion of that growth sustain itself."

As to growers being able to keep up with that increased demand, that's subject to both how well they can grow what consumers want and how quickly new certified organic farmers can come online.

USDA advisory panel rejects proposal to bar hydroponics in organic production
"You can't just flip a switch and produce more product," Batcha said. The transition from conventional agriculture to certified organic takes at least three years. Plus, there are packing houses and processors. "Everybody's got to be certified." During the pandemic, she said, USDA adapted to virtual inspections for re-certification but not for initial ones. "That did hold back the market to a degree in 2020."

Andrea Carlson, a USDA ERS economist, said in an Ag Outlook Forum on organics that the cost of organic transition averages $1,500. The premium a grower gets for an organic product varies, but Carlson cited examples of wholesale premiums ranging from 67% for tomatoes to 85% for Fuji apples. For farmers who can swing it, the shift can be profitable.

Coke Farms works with more than 80 growers in much of California. Gemignani said that number was just 70 at the start of 2020. Those new farmers were on the organic pathway well before the pandemic hit. Still, she said from 1981 to 2019 Coke Farms grew from 1 to 70 farms. Then, in one year, "you have more than a dozen new growers, it does tell you something."

Fresh produce accounts for about 40% of organic sales. Carlson said after that, the leading sectors for organic are dairy and poultry (including eggs). Demand is increasing for bread, pasta and rice, but for grains, imports often fill the gap between production, Carlson said.

"Until 2017, the value of imported organic soybeans and corn increased every year, peaking at about $250 million in 2018," Carlson said. However, "there were some issues with fraudulent organic feed grains, leading to the proposed rule to strengthen organic enforcement in terms of handlers and brokers." In 2019, and 2020, she said it appears that the organic imports are increasing again.

Restaurant items that are less familiar to home cooks, like the frisée these workers are harvesting at Jardine Farms, didn't do as well in the retail sector.

Consumers are also after organic snacks, beverages and baked goods, Carlson said. Early pandemic pantry loading boosted sakes of organic baking mixes 30%, Batcha said, adding that the prospect of transitioning to organic may be tougher on grain farms where distance to a certified processor cuts into potential profit.

Beyond domestic sales, USDA's Foreign Agricultural Service recently released a positive outlook for organic produce demand in Europe, which has an equivalency agreement with the United States—products certified in either place can be marketed as organic in both. In particular, fresh produce that can get to northern Europe during the winter have a lot of potential, the report found, and if more specialty grains are grown in the United States, those, too, could fill EU demand.

In addition to the hurdle of certifying additional acres for organic production, Seeley sees a challenge coming from indoor produce growers. There has been debate about whether indoor growers that don't use soil, such as hydroponic systems, can be certified organic. For now, they potentially offer some shoppers a local option that may win out over certified organic, Seeley says. They're small players right now, but Seeley notes "huge amounts of capital" are being invested in indoor systems.

Restaurants, schools and other settings will again—someday—offer the option to eat away from home. That's when consumers will reveal just how committed they are to cooking for themselves. If the habit sticks, it could signal long term growth for the organic sector.

"When families are cooking at home and eating more at home, they're choosing organic," Batcha said.

News Briefs:

Walnut industry's growth prompts strategic marketing plans. California's walnut growers and promoters are eager to expand their reach. During the California Walnut Board and Commission's industry conference this week, executive director Michelle Connelly said retail sales remained strong during the past year but challenges remain. Other nuts are outspending the walnut industry by as much as 5 times (in the case of almonds). Jack Mariani of Mariani Nut Company said the walnut industry is adjusting to 100,000 more acres yielding 300,000 more pounds of product over the past 5 years, fueling the drive to find more market share in every possible sector. "We're competing for share of stomach just like any other consumer product," Connelly said, and the goal is to make walnuts top-of-mind for consumers year-round, not just for holiday baking. The Commission is also looking toward export markets with hope they will open some additional sales opportunities as the Biden administration establishes its trade priorities and polices. The Tuesday sessions also explored research on health benefits of walnuts and food safety. The meeting continues Wednesday and will include presentation of research findings about the return on investment the Walnut Board and Commission has seen from its work.

National Farmers Union wraps up annual meeting. National Farmers Union members wrapped up their virtual annual meeting this week after listening to Secretary Tom Vilsack, Ag Committee leaders and other speakers. In addition, voting delegates debated changes to the organization's bylaws and policy positions. Some of the most contentious discussion focused on a bylaw change that would require voting delegates to meet USDA's definition of actively engaged in farming. "We allow all kinds of families to join," noted North Dakota Farmers Union President Mark Watne. "However, if you want to come to the NFU convention and vote as a delegate, you have to be a farmer." NFU President Rob Larew said the bylaws change was "sought by those who felt it appropriate to do so at the national level to ensure that the farmer's voice remains center to the organization." Currently state organizations have different types of memberships and set their own processes for determining eligibility for voting delegates in their state conventions. Some states require that delegates either were or currently are farmers, he explained. The change was overwhelmingly approved by a weighted vote. In addition, delegates adopted all of the organization's existing policies from 2020 for 2021 and approved four special orders that address a wide range of issues including rural health care, livestock marketing, dairy policy, biofuels and checkoffs. Those special orders include: Family Farming and Moving Forward from Covid-19; Family Farming and Issues Facing the Livestock and Dairy Industries; Family Farming and Climate Change; Family Farming and Biofuels.

Farm Hands West: Cueva joins West Pak Avocado

Leonard Cueva

Leonard Cueva has been hired by West Pak Avocado as senior vice president of finance. Cueva previously was vice president of finance at C.R. Laurence.

Ippolito Fruit and Produce has brought on **Steve Roberts** as the new director of sales and retail. He most recently was the key account manager at Vineland Growers.

USDA has named **Dewayne Goldmon** as the new senior adviser for racial equality to the Secretary of Agriculture and **Andy Green** as the senior adviser for fair and competitive markets. For the past year, Goldmon has served as the executive director of the National Black Growers Council. Green most recently served as a senior fellow for economic policy at the Center for American Progress. To read more on the appointments, click here.

Krysta Harden has been named president and CEO of the U.S. Dairy Export Council, filling the shoes of **Tom Vilsack,** who has been confirmed as the Secretary of Agriculture. Harden was promoted from the position of chief operating officer. Before joining USDEC, Harden was the chief sustainability officer with Corteva and DuPont. Before that, she served seven years working with Vilsack at USDA, three of which were spent as deputy secretary of agriculture.

Bayer has made new leadership changes to help accelerate the strategy implementation of its Crop Science division and its intent to divest the company's environmental science professional business. **Jackie Applegate** has been tapped to be president of Crop Science North America at Bayer. She previously served as head of global vegetable seeds and environmental science. **Jeremy Williams** has been named head of The Climate Corporation and Digital

Farming. Williams most recently was head of plant biotechnology at Bayer. He succeeds **Michael Stern,** who after 30 years with Bayer Crop Science and The Climate Corporation, announced he would retire. Bayer also named **Tom Armitage** from Mondelez as head of global communications for crop science. Bayer appointed **Gilles Galliou**, currently head of commercial operations for Bayer Vegetable Seeds Americas, to lead the Environmental Science business and the planned divestment. **Inci Dannenberg**, currently head of global strategic marketing for Vegetable Seeds, was also appointed to run the crop science global vegetable seeds business.

The Department of Commerce has announced new leadership appointments. In the office of the secretary: **Mike Harney** has been tapped to be chief of staff, **Luis Jimenez** will be deputy chief of staff, **Matthew Bucci** will serve as counselor to the Secretary, **Cynthia Aragon** will serve as the White House liaison, **Brittany Caplin** will serve as the deputy director of public affairs and press secretary, and **Gabriela Castillo** will be director of public affairs. At the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration: **Karen Hyun** will be the chief of staff, **Letise LaFeir** will serve as a senior adviser, **Emily McAuliffe** has been hired as a special assistant, and **Walker Smith** will serve as general counsel. To see all appointments, click here.

Responsible Industry for a Sound Environment (RISE) has brought on three new additions to its Washington D.C. team. **Kristen Spotz**, the new senior director of regulatory affairs, joins RISE from the Consumer Brands Association, where she served as manager of regulatory affairs. **Megan Striegel** has been hired in the newly created position of RISE's grassroots manager. She previously worked at the Environmental Protection Agency under the Trump Administration as a special adviser in the agricultural adviser's office. **Karie Evans** was hired as the new communications manager for RISE. She previously was a marketing coordinator for the American Chemical Society.

Dewayne Goldmon

Former Kansas Sen. **Pat Roberts** has joined Capitol Counsel as a new partner. Roberts served four terms in the Senate and eight terms in the House of Representatives. At the time of his retirement, he chaired the Senate Agriculture Committee and also served on the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. He is the only person to serve as chairman of the House Agriculture Committee and Senate Agriculture Committee, working on a total of eight farm bills.

Mike Seyfert has officially started at the National Grain and Feed Association as president and CEO. Seyfert spent the last seven years at the FMC Corporation, most recently as the director of government and industry affairs.

Laura Wood Peterson has started a natural resource and agriculture policy firm called Laura Wood Peterson Consulting. She previously worked at Indigo as a strategic adviser and senior director of government affairs.

The U.S. Farmers and Ranchers in Action has elected a new chair and added three new members to its board of directors. **Anne Meis**, from the Nebraska Soybean Board, now chairs the USFRA board. Meis and her husband raise cattle and grow corn, soybeans, and alfalfa on their family farm in Elgin, Neb. The three new board members include **Julie Fussner** from Culver's Franchising System, **Janie Simms Hipp** from the Native American Agriculture Fund, and **Hope Bentley** from McDonald's.

The Federal Agricultural Mortgage Corporation (Farmer Mac) has appointed **Eric McKissack** of Chicago as the newest member of the company's board of directors. He fills the seat of former board member **W. David Hemingway** after his unexpected passing in November. McKissack is the founder and former CEO of Channing Capital Management, a Chicago-based investment advisory firm. He retired from the firm in 2019 after 16 years at the helm and currently serves as CEO Emeritus.

Jackie Applegate

Taylor Wiseman has been promoted to legislative assistant for the Senate Ag Committee's minority staff. She works on the portfolio for livestock, climate, forestry and economics. She previously served as a staff assistant and legislative correspondent.

Holt Edwards is now a legislative assistant for Sen. **Cynthia Lummis**, R-Wyo. He covers the portfolio for transportation and public works. Edwards previously worked at the EPA during the Trump administration as a senior adviser for senate affairs in the Office of Congressional and Intergovernmental Relations.

Jonathan Gilbert now serves as the deputy chief of staff for Rep. **Mike Levins**, D-Calif. He covers the agriculture and food, appropriations, commerce, energy, environmental protection, foreign trade, natural resources, and transportation portfolio. He previously served as legislative director.

Marji Guyler-Alaniz. Photo: AgWired.

FarmHer founder **Marji Guyler-Alaniz** has taken a new job as the senior vice president of risk and operations at AgriSompo North America. Guyler-Alaniz first started FarmHer back in 2013 and will continue to host the FarmHer series, but has taken a step back from the day-to-day responsibilities.

Taylor Nikkel has joined the Livestock Marketing Association (LMA) staff as government and industry affairs administrator. Nikkel previously worked at the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation in Omaha as a loan review analyst. LMA has also promoted **Pierce Bennett** to director of government and industry affairs.

Rick Pfitzinger, chief operating officer of the Farm Credit System Insurance Corporation, has retired after 33 years of service in the federal government. Pfitzinger became FCSIC's chief operating officer in 2018, and before that was director of risk management for several years after first serving as FCSIC's chief financial officer. **Howard Rubin**, FCSIC's chief risk officer, has been tapped to succeed Pfitzinger. He joined FCSIC in 2013 as general counsel.

Matt Weimar, regional vice president for South Asia at the U.S. Wheat Associates, has announced he will retire on Aug. 31. Weimar has been with USW for 34 years, first starting out as a country director in the Beijing office in 1987. He became regional director in the USW Hong Kong office in 1993 and started his current position in 2015. **Joe Sowers**, regional vice president for Philippines and Korea, has been named Weimar's successor and will move from Manila, Philippines, to USW's South Asian regional office in Singapore. Sowers joined USW in 2005 as a market analyst in Washington, D.C.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor