

As state tees up drought plans, farmers plead for one last crop

State and federal water and wildlife officials were noticeably on edge last week when describing how rapidly California has descended into extreme drought. State scientists have been scrambling to analyze how the snowpack could melt so quickly and lead to nearly a million acre-feet of water disappearing through either evaporation or into the dry soil.

At an informational hearing for the State Water Resources Control Board, the San Luis Water District had one request: ensure water transfers can continue in August. This would allow one last almond harvest before many of the district's 90 farmers let their trees die. The state, however, plans to delay those transfer decisions until fall.

Environmentalists and sportfishing groups, meanwhile, shamed the board for not curtailing water diversions to farmers earlier to prevent more fish die-offs.

The agencies are bracing for still more painful decisions to come, as they must determine how and when California's remaining storage water should be put to use. A portion is certain to remain in storage this year, as scientists are realizing 2022 will likely be dry as well and it will take years to fully recover the state's water deficit.

“We all need to be thinking about this much beyond this fall or winter and really into next year,” cautioned Department of Water Resources (DWR) Director Karla Nemeth, adding that the state is now drier than the “very deep drought” that just ended. **“We like to think about droughts as a slow-moving disaster. This one is a fast-developing crisis.”**



Lake Oroville depletion. Photo: California Department of Water Resources

U.S. Bureau of Reclamation Regional Director Ernest Conant said the phenomenon of hydrological forecasts “going south” overnight has occurred throughout the West and caught forecasters off guard.

The sudden water loss meant that policy decisions made just weeks earlier were no longer adequate. Water released from reservoirs in Northern California would not be enough to maintain water quality standards in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for fish habitats to survive. On the other side of the dams, inflow rates were well below expectations as well. DWR based its response on the most critically dry years in the past. But inflow rates this year were twice as bad.

Within six weeks, the snowpack went from 70% of average to less than 8%.

“We're talking about this as an evolving situation that had otherwise been unheard of,” said David Rizzardo, who oversees DWR’s hydrology branch, during a drought workshop with stakeholders last Friday. “It's almost in the form of the climate change that we would have expected to see later this century.”

Rizzardo explained that it would take 273% of average rainfall next winter for the San Joaquin River Basin to recover in 2022. In the Tulare Lake Basin, it would be 340% of average just to get back to net zero.

“It's not going to happen in one year,” he said. “It's going to take multiple years, to the point of almost 3 to 3.5 years-worth of rainfall on average just to get back.”

Barbara Barrigan-Parrilla, director of the conservation group Restore the Delta, lashed out at the agencies for not planning for this type of situation.



Ernest Conant, U.S. Bureau of Reclamation regional director for California-Great Basin

“If our scrappy little group could figure out that this was coming, we don't understand why the Department of Water Resources and the Bureau of Reclamation didn't plan for a potential quick loss of snowpack,” she said. “What I feel like I'm hearing today is a rehash of what we have known for years, recast as a surprise.”

DWR researchers are just beginning to understand the impacts on snowpack from the combination of high temperatures and dry soils.

“One thing that really looms large for me is this mysterious, scary thing of close to a million acre-feet disappearing overnight into the ground,” said Justin Fredrickson, an environmental policy analyst for the California Farm Bureau. **“We're going to need to figure out better what the role of dry soils are.”**

In response to the dry conditions and warm temperatures, farmers planted earlier this year, according to CDFG Secretary Karen Ross.

Northern California rice farmers agreed last fall to delay diversions due to the low storage levels. With reduced allocations, they planted 25% less acreage this year. According to Sacramento River Settlement Contractors, further strains on the system led to an additional 10% of fallowing. Farmers volunteered more cutbacks to provide junior water rights

holders with permanent crops with enough water to make it through the year “without deep cuts and pain,” according to a representative for the contractors.

The cuts also mean less water for migrating waterfowl along the Pacific Flyway. Department of Fish and Wildlife Director Chuck Bonham pointed out that the Klamath Basin, the first major holdover spot for the birds as they fly south, is among the driest parts of the region.

“They're not going to pull over. There's nowhere for them to stop,” he said, adding: “They're going to come into the valley down here in the Sacramento basin, and it's going to be dry.”

Squeezing millions of birds onto much less space “is just a recipe for disease and other management challenges,” explained Bonham. According to Water Board Vice Chair Dorene D’Adamo, private partnerships in conjunction with public space will be essential for preserving enough of “a postage stamp” for adequate habitat.

“It's an all-hands-on-deck, precarious situation,” said Bonham. “Extinction is real on our side of the equation.”

Delta smelt are already on the verge of extinction, and low inflow will affect salinity levels—a concerning sign going into the year, according to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Regional Director Paul Souza. The agency has trucked to the ocean more than a million endangered salmon from fisheries, completing a voyage the fish were not able to with the current conditions.



CDFW Director Chuck Bonham

“If we have a year like this next year, all the drama we're facing—that will be multiplied by a factor of 10,” warned Souza.

No easy wins are left on the table, responded State Water Board Chair Joaquin Esquivel.

The state water board is looking at early June for issuing curtailment orders for water holders with post-1914 rights. Agricultural districts are encouraging that decision to be made as soon as possible, noting this happened on May 1 in 2015 for the last drought.

The Oakdale Irrigation District, in contrast, asked that no curtailments be issued in the San Joaquin River Basin, arguing that Reclamation acted illegally when it released more water from the New Melones Reservoir to meet Delta outflow requirements, taking pressure off the Northern California reservoirs that have experienced low inflow.

“We've been trying to think outside the box and take on actions that in some cases we've never done before,” explained Conant about the decision. “We're going to continue to work collectively with our federal and state partners to make sure we've turned over every rock in this very challenging year.”

Moving into the summer, DWR's top priority will be cold water needs for fisheries, according to Nemeth. Protecting water storage in Folsom Reservoir and maintaining water quality in the Delta are next, along with providing certain conditions that can lessen drought impacts on fish and wildlife. The department will then shift gears into contingency planning for 2022.

Across the board, officials and stakeholders stressed the need for collaboration.

“We can't tolerate parts of California pointing fingers at each other, as much as we need to inspire all of us to think about this as a California challenge,” said Bonham. “The directors of these relevant agencies have to be engaged on a daily basis together, trying to solve these problems.”

D'Adamo encouraged the officials to share that outside the box thinking with stakeholders as well, to avoid losing any opportunities.

“Sometimes there are unintended consequences that we may miss,” she said.

Bonham responded that he will not take any decisions lightly, since there are sure to be ramifications in all directions.



Joe Del Bosque, CEO of Del Bosque Farms

“Those impacts could run to people I consider to be colleagues in the water user and agricultural space,” he said. “We don't have a lot of time to dilly dally, but we also need to be super deliberate.”

One unanticipated outcome arose from the state's new incidental take permit governing Delta flows for the State Water Project. This led to an additional 300,000 acre-feet of carryover storage in Oroville Reservoir from 2020, about 20% more than years before, according to Nemeth.

A similar case was made by Shelley Cartwright, a government affairs manager for Westlands Water District. Due to the 2019 biological opinions signed by then-President Donald Trump, Shasta Reservoir had additional carryover storage, which meant Reclamation should not be having the issues it has with temperature control for salmon, she argued.

“It is important for the board to focus on utilizing water and enforcing water rights throughout the system, rather than micromanaging only one part of the system,” said Cartwright, referring to Delta fish protections. “Equally clear is the effect water shortages will have on communities and the livelihoods throughout the San Joaquin Valley.”

Farmer Joe Del Bosque called it ironic that those same agricultural communities were considered essential at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic early last spring.

“I urge you to consider that striking the right balance means no single community or single segment of society bears a disproportionate share of harm,” Del Bosque told the state water board.

Board member Laurel Firestone, who spent decades working on drinking water issues in the Central Valley, said the agencies should be expecting and planning for the worst.

“I know very well that there are real economic and community and job impacts from changes that ag has to make,” said Firestone. “It’s also [about] coming together to look at what kind of mitigation programs we can provide for our most vulnerable communities and species.”

Farm Bureau’s Justin Fredrickson described it as an urgent need for all water users and all Californians to come together to build a resilient system.

“A year like this should be an urgent wakeup call,” he said. “Our system is too tight. Our system is too fragile. Our system is too vulnerable.”

Fredrickson pushed back on arguments that the state is wasting water by sending it to agriculture, when farmers are just trying to survive “a very frightening year.”

“It’s a tough year. There are no villains here. And we’re all doing our best,” he said. “Very clearly, collaboration—not punitive measures—provide the best way to get through a crisis like this year.”

State, federal programs for beginning farmers and ranchers get nod in California

Gov. Gavin Newsom’s revised budget calls for millions of dollars to support new farmers and ranchers.

Specifically, it proposes \$10 million for beginning farmer and rancher training and farm management apprenticeship programs, which is a new budget proposal but still less than some farm advocates were hoping.

CDFA Secretary Karen Ross said the funding will help maintain and expand diversity in California agriculture, including by size of farm.



Several federal and CDFA programs aim to help young families get started in farming. USDA photo.

“We value our multi-generation farms that have grown into large entities and we value small farms,” she said in a press conference after the May budget revision was announced. The budget line would include incubator programs for new farms and farmworker training.

“We value the opportunities for farmworkers to do training to become farmers,” Ross said.

Several ag groups expressed support for funding the programs, which they say will benefit more than just the next generation of California farmers.

“Investing in beginning farmer and farmworker training programs will support the growth of food systems jobs and the local farming economy,” Community Alliance with Family Farmers wrote in its legislative ask, which called for \$15 million for beginning farmers and farmworker training.

USDA also has increased its efforts to attract and keep new farmers and ranchers.

More than 200 people have contacted California's statewide Beginning Farmer Rancher Initiative since the four-agency USDA collaboration launched in December.

Staff members in California's Farm Service Agency, Risk Management Agency, Rural Development and Natural Resources Conservation Service offices are coordinating the effort with Victor Hernandez, of NRCS, leading the team. He says the goal is to match farmers and ranchers who are just getting started with USDA programs and also with a network of organizations eager to help them succeed.

Eligible farmers can apply for \$50,000 USDA microloans when they do not yet qualify as commercial borrowers. Hernandez said other financial resources and agronomic and conservation tools are available through the collaboration.

“We're building the bench of business partners, agricultural partners and educational partners, he said.

Some of the business partners include Kern County Women's Business Center, California Farm Link, Minority Business Development Agency, California Asian Chamber and Kitchen Table Advisors.

The agriculture partners range from national groups such as American Farmland Trust to state programs like CDFA's Farm to School, to county ag commissioners' offices. Ventura College, Sierra College and UC Santa Cruz cooperative extension are among the academic partners, though additional training programs through private nonprofits such as Archi's Institute for Sustainable Agriculture and ALBA Farmers are also collaborating.

Hernandez is rolling out a series of webinars, beginning June 9, that will introduce each of the partners and what they can offer to beginning farmers (they will be recorded and available afterward on demand). Details on the partnership webinars for new farmers will be posted (under Events & Deadlines) when they become available.

Through the collaboration, Hernandez says he can “act as a matchmaker” connecting the farmers with whatever resources they need at a particular moment in their business or farm development.

Many barriers can prevent an aspiring farmer from starting a new business, and Hernandez hopes the initiative can break down some of them. USDA defines “new” farmers are those in their first decade, so Hernandez says after one milestone is reached, he's still there to help farmers with their next steps.

“As soon as you meet that, let's start talking again,” he said. “This is going to be a long term relationship.”

The California legislature has until June 15 to finalize the state's budget.

Interior, USDA coordinating on Western drought relief

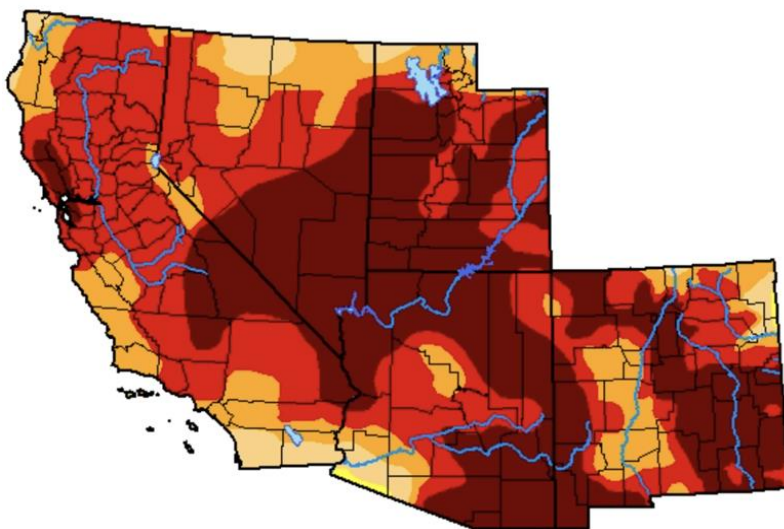
The Biden administration is assuring lawmakers that it's working to provide short-term emergency relief to the drought-stricken West even as farm groups continue to push for some relaxation of environmental rules that limit access to irrigation water.

More than 90% of the Southwest and California is currently experiencing drought, with nearly 40% of the region in exceptional drought, according to the National Integrated Drought Information System.

“The scale and intensity of this drought is really historic,” Elizabeth Klein, a senior counselor to Interior Secretary Deb Haaland who is working across that department on drought-related concerns, told a House Natural Resources subcommittee on Tuesday.

She said the multi-agency National Drought Resilience Partnership, co-led by the Interior and Agriculture departments, will “identify both short-term emergency relief but also longer-term resilience strategies” with an eye toward “projects that support agriculture, cities, tribes and the environment.”

The sometimes conflicting demands of those constituencies have led to tensions over scarce water supplies, particularly in the Klamath Basin along the inland California-Oregon border. State and federal water projects have attempted to balance agricultural water needs and Endangered Species Act protections for certain fish while honoring the Yoruk Tribe’s cultural and economic reliance on the ecosystem. The tribe canceled its 2021 commercial fishing season for the fifth consecutive year in an effort to preserve salmon runs.



U.S. Drought Monitor conditions for the Southwest

Amy Cordalis, a member of the tribe and its legal counsel, said the projects have failed, destroying salmon habitat and reducing stream flow. The management regime, she said, prioritizes “agricultural diversions over the needs of fish and ecosystem.” Any legislative drought relief package must include “equitable funding to help tribal commercial fishermen and their families survive the drought,” she added.

But Klamath Basin farmers also are suffering and Dan Keppen, executive director of the Family Farm Alliance, who also spoke for the Klamath Water Users Association, said “water management in the West is becoming too inflexible,” and he offered as evidence the focus on specific fish species, which can lead to less water flowing to downstream farmers, as an example.

But Klamath Basin farmers also are suffering and Dan Keppen,

He said the current system “does not work for farms or waterfowl” and may not have benefited the fish. He called for a new basin-wide agreement, without more litigation that can bog down the process.

Oregon Republican Rep. Cliff Bentz acknowledged the urgency of finding solutions. As people debate who gets diminishing supplies, “the allocation of water to in-stream flows will pit tribe against tribe, fish against fish, fish against agriculture, communities against communities.” He pressed Klein for specifics on how the federal government will help.

Klein emphasized the need for strong climate research and to honor the government's trust and treaty obligations with tribes but said the Drought Relief Working Group she's a part of will be reaching out broadly across government entities and to affected communities. She said, "the toll that this will take on individual families all across the country is quite serious."

California Democratic Rep. Jim Costa, who operates an almond farm in the central San Joaquin Valley, estimated that 700,000 acres of farmland in the state would go fallow this year. He said farmers who can are buying water on the spot market. But others are counting on the California State Water Resources Control Board to release water from Lake Shasta, which is very low and must comply with temperature requirements to protect salmon before allowing water to flow downstream for agricultural irrigation. If that doesn't happen "certainly there's going to be bankruptcy and farm workers will be out of jobs," he said.

"We want to find ways to reach out to the communities that are suffering," Klein said.

Drought also raises concerns about the wildfire season, which brought the question of forest management to the hearing. Idaho state forester Craig Foss said, "managed forests are healthy forests," and reiterated the concern that litigation can slow progress on plans that take a long time to develop and need to be implemented in a timely manner. He said several bills before Congress could help develop forest resiliency for both drought and wildfire, including the Trillion Trees Act, the Rural Forest Markets Act, and the National Prescribed Fire Act.

Costa said bipartisan support is needed for funding better forest management.

Although drought conditions are variable across the West, several observers have said parts of California are likely heading into a season that will be the driest since the late 1970s.

"Our 20th century infrastructure is colliding with the reality of our 21st century climate crisis," said Joaquin Esquivel, who chairs the California Water Resources Control Board. He said the old ways of managing water "often unthinkingly perpetuate a less enlightened past" in which certain communities suffered disproportionately.

Michael Markus, general manager for the Orange County Water District, offered several ways that water managers could leverage investments in existing technologies and infrastructures. For example, he shared the success of the Groundwater Replenishment System (GWRS) that was constructed with the Orange County Sanitation District in 2008 to create a locally controlled source of water that is independent of water imported from the Delta and Colorado River.

"The GWRS takes treated wastewater from the Orange County Sanitation District that otherwise would be discharged into the Pacific Ocean. We use a three-step advanced purification process that consists of microfiltration, reverse osmosis, and ultraviolet light with hydrogen peroxide. This purification process produces high-quality water that exceeds state and federal drinking water standards. It protects the groundwater basin from seawater intrusion and overdraft," he noted in his written testimony.

In addition, he called for maximizing new water supplies through enhanced stormwater capture, additional surface storage, desalinization projects, innovative financing and more.

"OCWD believes that the best defense to the drought is a strong offense of developing new water supplies to serve our constituents," Markus said.

Climate funding push splits Senate Ag leaders

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow is working to secure a historic increase in conservation spending as part of a climate and infrastructure package, creating a rift with the panel's top Republican, who says she is prematurely trying to reshape farm bill programs without GOP input.

Stabenow, D-Mich., wants to include \$50 billion in new conservation funding over 10 years in the infrastructure bill that Democrats may try to pass through the budget reconciliation process unless they can get a deal with Republicans, which is not at all certain at this point.

By comparison, the 2018 farm bill authorized \$60 billion in total conservation funding over 10 years, with much of that front-loaded into the first five years.

“I’m pushing for \$50 billion more for USDA traditional conservation programs, because the White House’s proposal (for \$1 billion in new conservation spending) isn’t anywhere near enough,” Stabenow said during a recent Farm Journal Foundation webinar. “We have a once-in-a-decade opportunity to expand these programs and build farm bill baseline at the same time.”



Senate Ag Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich.

Stabenow also wants to increase funding for agricultural research but hasn’t said how much funding she would seek in that area.

Biden’s American Jobs Plan “calls for more than \$110 billion for research across the federal government, and climate-smart agricultural research needs to be included,” Stabenow said.

Talking to reporters after a committee meeting last week, Stabenow assured Sen. John Boozman, the Ag Committee’s top Republican, that the 2023 farm bill would be written by the committee. But Boozman, R-Ark., suggested the conservation spending increase Stabenow wants would amount to a “massive” change in farm policy without any input from Republicans or most Democrats.

“The problem is we have a situation where we’re getting locked into, or potentially getting locked into, significant spending,” Boozman said in a subsequent interview with *Agri-Pulse*.

If Democrats decide to move the legislation through the budget reconciliation process, they won’t need any Republican votes in the Senate; if all 50 Democrats back the measure, Vice President Kamala Harris would cast the tiebreaking vote. Under regular Senate procedures, it would take 60 votes to pass the legislation, which means at least 10 GOP senators would have to vote for it.

A longtime lobbyist who supports the increase in conservation spending said that it shouldn’t be that controversial, because it creates a new funding source for the next farm bill and that the committee would have control of how the money is used.

"You can fix and tweak the policy all you care to in 2023, but the only real chance to get more money for agriculture to do a major campaign to get as far as possible to net zero (on ag carbon emissions) is now," said Ferd Hoefner, a consultant and former policy director for the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition.

But Boozman stresses that he has "no idea" what Stabenow has in mind for the extra money. **"The problem is that we're not having a discussion of any of this, just numbers. Why not \$75 billion? Why not \$30 billion? Who knows? They're just numbers that somebody has come up with," he said.**

One of his concerns would be the amount of funding that could be used for land-idling programs like the Conservation Reserve Program, which takes land out of production for at least 10 years under current rules. "I do know that if you take a significant amount of land out of production, a discussion needs to be had about" the potential impact on U.S. export markets, he said.



Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark.

USDA is currently trying to enroll 4 million more acres in CRP by increasing payment rates and financial incentives.

Boozman also says he has concerns with the potential tax increases that Democrats would use to pay for the infrastructure package. Biden proposed to increase the corporate tax rate, tax all capital gains at death and to restrict the use of like-kind exchanges to defer taxes on real estate sales.

"There's tremendous ramifications with this," Boozman said of the potential revenue sources.

A coalition that includes several major environmental groups as well as a few farm groups, including the National Farmers Union and National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, signed a letter to congressional leaders on Tuesday that calls for spending \$200 billion on "farm bill conservation, research, renewable energy, energy efficiency, forestry, and regional food system and supply chain resilience programs, and should be in addition to the agriculture, forestry, and rural-related elements already contained in the President's American Jobs Plan."

But most farm groups have stayed out of the fray so far. The Food and Agriculture Climate Alliance, which includes major farm and commodity groups, supports more funding for conservation programs and some form of payments to farmers who can't qualify for carbon credits on conservation practices they're already using.

However, the coalition hasn't proposed a specific amount of funding. FACA's founding members include the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Council of Farmer Cooperatives as well as NFU.

"It's important not to become the soccer ball when the big dogs want to have a soccer game," said AFBF Executive Vice President Dale Moore.

Moore, who was a legislative director on the House Agriculture Committee during a partisan fight over what became the 1996 farm bill, expressed confidence that Stabenow and Boozman would eventually get back to working together when it comes to writing a new farm bill, which is due in 2023.

"I strongly suspect that they are going to figure things out, and will probably share with us what they feel like we need to know, and right now I don't get the impression they feel like we need to know exactly where they're going to be," he said.

Senate Republicans who are negotiating with the White House on an infrastructure package haven't given up on reaching a deal, at least not publicly. Republicans initially offered to spend about \$600 billion. The White House countered last Friday with a \$1.7 trillion proposal, which Republicans quickly rejected.

Republicans expect to have a new proposal ready by Thursday. Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., told reporters Tuesday there are still major disagreements with the White House over what should be included in the bill beyond traditional forms of infrastructure, as well as how to pay for it.

Republicans refuse to consider changes in the 2017 tax law and say unspent COVID-19 relief funding should be redirected toward infrastructure.

Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., remains a major wild card for Democrats. He told reporters Tuesday he thought there had been an agreement to handle traditional infrastructure spending in separate legislation. Manchin also expressed skepticism about one of Biden's top priorities, \$174 billion in spending on electric vehicles and charging stations.

USDA rolls out debt relief package as more socially disadvantaged producers come forward seeking relief

USDA is rolling out its debt relief program for socially disadvantaged farmers, sending out offer letters to producers eligible for direct loan relief, even as it grapples with how to pay off guaranteed loans in the face of concerns from banks worried about loss of income.

The American Rescue Plan allocated \$4 billion for the debt relief plan but USDA can go above that amount. The legislation says the department can spend "such sums as may be necessary" under the program, which offers 120% debt relief.

The extra 20% is to pay taxes on the payments, and Farm Service Agency Administrator Zach Ducheneaux says USDA plans to partner with local community groups to offer free tax advice to producers.

According to USDA, there are about 14,400 SDA borrowers with about \$2.7 billion in debt, as well as another \$400-million-plus that is delinquent. More than 80% of the borrowers hold direct loans and account for about 65% of the debt — about \$2 billion. The rest, guaranteed lenders, have about \$1 billion.

Meanwhile, FSA is finding that more producers than are on the books as qualifying as socially disadvantaged are coming forward to collect the payouts.

The department does not have exact figures on the number of growers who have done so, but Ducheneaux and others involved in the process said they aren't surprised, given the history of discrimination faced by farmers of color.

Ducheneaux said the fact that producers did not check the appropriate box on their AD-2047 in the past will not be held against them. Instead, they will be able to check that box now to show they are eligible for the payouts.



*FSA Administrator Zach
Ducheneaux*

“If they make that designation, they will receive an offer letter,” Ducheneaux said. “They will have to affix their signature attesting to that in that offer letter.”

“The department overall and the Farm Service Agency have a policy of trusting the farmer,” he said.

A USDA spokesman elaborated on the issue. "As all loan recipients know, when you sign a document for a loan of any kind, it is a legal document that carries with it an obligation under the law. In addition to the normal FSA due diligence on all loan programs, Section 1006 of the [American Rescue Plan] provides \$5 million to the USDA Office of the Inspector General to run oversight over how the funds were disbursed as directed by the law. We expect and anticipate the OIG to carry out its duties."

Ducheneaux cited a VICE News story from earlier this month on the debt relief program that featured comments from a Louisiana FSA county commissioner opposed to the debt relief program who said minority borrowers are in debt “because they spend their money on other things. Their priorities might not be right.”

“Imagine that you could pass for white and that’s the environment that you're working in,” Ducheneaux said. “You bet your bottom dollar you're not going to check the African American or American Indian box.”

“That's the reality that we're trying to overcome,” he said. “And that's why we've been very welcoming from the beginning. Come in, update your AD-2047. We've put it on our website.”

Banks, however, are worried about losing anticipated income from interest payments on USDA-guaranteed loans when they are suddenly paid off. In a letter sent last month to Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack, they asked for reimbursement for lost future income.

“If USDA does not compensate lenders for such disruptions or avoid sudden loan payoffs, the likely result will be less access to credit for those seeking USDA guaranteed loans in the future, including SDA farmers/ranchers,” the American Bankers Association, Independent Community Bankers of America and the National Rural Lenders Association said in the letter. They also expressed concern about harm to secondary markets — the brokers and loan aggregators who buy and trade loans from the banks.

“We’re just saying, look at the consequences, recognize there are going to be some costs ... and provide compensation to lenders so we're not harmed, because some of them have made huge commitments to serving minority borrowers and young, beginning small

farmers through the use of the Guaranteed Loan Program,” Mark Scanlan, senior vice president of agriculture and rural policy at ICBA, told *Agri-Pulse*.

“USDA has the flexibility to ensure that lenders are not harmed in the way that this program is implemented,” he said, emphasizing that bankers are simply “making suggestions to USDA on implementation,” not threatening to cut off lending to socially disadvantaged farmers.



Mark Scanlan, ICBA

“Lenders are going to look at how this program is handled and see how much involvement they want to have in these programs — not [just] to socially disadvantaged farmers, but the guaranteed program overall,” he said.

He cited the example — also mentioned in the materials sent to USDA — of a bank in Georgia with a portfolio of more than \$200 million in loans to socially disadvantaged farmers. Losing that amount of loans would require the bank to adopt “a completely different business plan.”

Ducheneaux says the banks are “an essential partner” in making loans to farmers “because we don't have the budget authority, as we operate right now, to serve all of the credit needs that exist out there in farming and ranching.” FSA has been educating itself “to better understand what the relationship is like between the guaranteed lenders and the borrowers,” as well as the bankers' concern about the secondary markets.

“When liquidity gets tight, lenders tend to sell a lot of these loans into the secondary market,” Scanlan says, replenishing the banks' cash flow.

“We've got to have a relationship with the banks and we're confident that we will not be shaking the confidence of the guarantee on the secondary market with our efforts,” Ducheneaux said.

In addition, regarding the concern about "sudden" payouts, he says, “It's not like you're not getting no money. You're getting money. You're just getting it earlier than you would like, which I guess is a planning issue.”

Bankers will benefit, he says. “Every one of these banks will have a customer who has been substantially made whole, who will have assets that are free to pledge for new loans,” he says. “The bank can turn right around and make them an operating loan for next year, which usually has a higher rate of return than those term loans anyway.”

Scanlan, however, says “it's the sudden, dramatic impact” of the payout that is of concern. “All of a sudden, you've removed \$200 million from your business plan of assets that are earning new money.” One possible impact, he says: “You don't need the staff that you used to have to manage that.” And, especially for bankers in rural areas, it will be hard to make up that volume.

“If you were a farmer, and you had a couple thousand acres, and all of a sudden you had a 30% loss of your farm, that would be pretty significant,” Scanlan says.

The bankers want USDA “to look at those implications and do some calculations. Lenders have said they're willing to meet with USDA.”

He also stresses that the banks believe USDA has the statutory authority to make lenders whole. “USDA said they can establish a carbon bank through the CCC,” he says. “They certainly have the authority to do something like this, which should be fairly simple and easy to do.

And in this case, we're talking about banks that have significant amounts of these loans.”



Todd Van Hoose, Farm Credit Council

Ducheneaux says USDA has gotten information back from lenders on SDA loans “so we can get ready to roll that second [Notice of Funding Availability] out and deal with our Guaranteed Loan customers as well.” The Notice of Funds Availability on the direct loan debt payouts said the NOFA for the guaranteed loan portion of the program would go out within 120 days.

He also said the department is not deviating from its plan to make lump-sum payments as opposed to sending the payments out over time, as suggested by the bankers.

“We are the Farm Service Agency, and we are going to put the farmer first,” Ducheneaux said. He also noted that USDA has agreed to pay any prepayment penalties, but Scanlan says that’s “not really an issue” because they “only apply to a small percentage of loans that banks made.”

Todd Van Hoose, president and CEO of the Farm Credit Council, the trade association for the Farm Credit System, says it hasn’t been involved with the bankers’ efforts.

“We hear where they're coming from, but we're a little bit different,” he said. “We're owned by our customers, and we’re going to operate in their interests.”

Van Hoose says, “We're telling Administrator Ducheneaux and his team, essentially, just ask us for a payoff statement.”

But he also notes that paying off the guaranteed loans can be a complex exercise. “Some are annual-pay farm mortgage loans, which are fairly easy to calculate,” but some are lines of credit, which can be difficult to calculate with planting season going on and purchases of seeds and inputs,” he says.

Growers are “drawing on their credit lines like they're supposed to,” he says. “And so, the numbers of how much somebody owes change all the time,” making the guaranteed portion of the program “fairly complex.”

The bankers’ arguments don’t sit well with John Boyd, head of the National Black Farmers Association.

“It’s not a priority for the National Black Farmers Association, I’ll be honest with you,” Boyd said when asked if the banks should get some type of reimbursement.

“I think it was the wrong time” for bankers to be saying, “Hey, we need to make some more money off of this,” he said. “That's my personal opinion.”

He also emphasized, however, that he has no problem with white farmers receiving benefits from farm programs. “I want to say this because it's not making it into the stories,” he said. “I don't have a problem with white farmers getting the money. They deserve any kind of loan or benefit that the country has to offer.” The issue, he said, is accessibility.

“We have the best agricultural programs available in the world, but they’re not reaching Black farmers. That’s the problem,” said Boyd, who has been urging USDA to speed up its debt relief efforts.

Ducheneaux says he agrees with Boyd in that “we've got to get this done sooner rather than later.”

US peanut farmers pleased with edge over China for Japan market

The U.S. sold about \$20 million worth of peanuts to Japanese importers last year, but the American Peanut Council expects that American farmers will be able to sell a lot more nuts in the coming years now that they have a tariff advantage over the Chinese.

The key to that expected success is the U.S.-Japan Trade Agreement (USJTA). Japan agreed to completely remove its 10% tariff on peanut imports from the U.S., which is the second-largest supplier of the Japanese market behind China.

The Japanese tariffs on walnuts and almonds also dropped to zero, but there isn’t much competition from anywhere for U.S. sales of those nuts to Japan.

“China is the big kid on the block in terms of (peanut) exports to Japan and we have an opportunity to take some of that market share now that we have a tariff advantage,” Richard Owen, president and CEO of the American Peanut Council, tells *Agri-Pulse*. “China currently supplies about 70% of Japan’s peanut imports. The goal of the U.S. peanut industry is to try to get some of that market share.”

And the U.S.-Japan trade agreement will go a long way in helping make that happen, said Owen. **While Japan dropped the 10% tariff on U.S. peanuts on Jan. 1, 2020, Japanese importers continue to pay a 10% tariff on Chinese peanuts. That’s because China failed to negotiate a similar provision in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, or RCEP, according to an official with USDA’s Foreign Agricultural Service.**

RCEP is the massive trade pact between China, Japan, Australia, South Korea, New Zealand, Vietnam, Singapore, Thailand, Laos, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia, Burma, Brunei and Malaysia. It’s essentially China’s effort to counter the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a pact of Pacific Rim countries.

The U.S. and Japan led the formation of the TPP until the U.S. pulled out in January 2017, and then negotiated a bilateral trade pact with Japan.

And that trade pact is giving the U.S. an edge in what was a declining market. U.S. peanut exports to Japan were valued at about \$20.3 million in 2020, down 31% from about \$26.6 million in 2018, according to the available data from USDA.

While Japan’s population appears to be declining, the country is also eating more peanuts and peanut-containing products like peanut butter, says Owen. And some of that is due to years of marketing and investment by the American Peanut Council.

The group, says Owen, “has invested in consumer campaigns to try to offset some perceptions that peanuts may be high in calories and fat, trying to reverse that perception so the Japanese will feel good about consuming nutritious peanuts and peanut butter.”

All of that work communicating scientific research about the healthful benefits of peanuts has paid off, says Owen, and now the tariff reduction will also make U.S. products cheaper than products from competitors like China, Argentina, Brazil and South Africa.

Eating healthy is of paramount importance to the Japanese, according to a recent analysis by FAS.

“According to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), over 70% of Japanese people prefer to live a healthy lifestyle,” the FAS report notes. “Consumption is increasing for products that augment nutrients such as vitamins and minerals.”

That’s why the Japanese are also such big consumers of almonds, walnuts and other tree nuts. Farm group officials say the tariff reduction should spur trade because now the nuts are more affordable, but it’s still too early to detect impacts.

“We’re certainly pleased with the reduction,” said Julie Adams, a vice president for the Almond Board of California. “Any reduction will certainly benefit shipments.”

The U.S. exported about \$258 million worth of almonds and \$133 million worth of walnuts to Japan in 2020.

Pamela Graviet, senior marketing director for the California Walnut Commission, says California holds a 97% market share for Japan’s imports of the nuts.

The U.S. is Japan’s largest foreign supplier of tree nuts, and Japan lowered its tariffs on those commodities as well, making them more affordable.

“In 2020, the United States exported \$411 million of nuts to Japan, making Japan the (seventh-largest) overseas market for U.S. nuts,” according to FAS. “Almonds and walnuts are Japan’s top nut imports from the United States, accounting for over half of Japan’s total nut and nut product imports in 2019.”

US propels vision of global farm tech solutions to climate change

The U.S. doesn’t just want to employ modern farming technology and practices to combat climate change. **It wants to work with governments and the private sector around the globe to collaborate on research through a new platform to improve the way farmers and ranchers produce food and fiber while reducing carbon emissions and preserving the environment.**

The U.S. and an eclectic list of allies — United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Denmark, Australia, Singapore, Uruguay, Singapore and Israel — joined together on the sidelines of the President Joe Biden’s Leaders’ Summit on Climate in April to create the Agriculture Innovation Mission for

Climate (AIM for Climate) and they are hoping to bring more countries into the effort, says Bill Hohenstein, director of USDA's Office of Energy and Environmental Policy.

The countries are scheduled to launch AIM for Climate in November at the UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow.

While the effort is not a United Nations program, much of the work on it will be done on the sidelines of UN gatherings such as the Food Systems Summit in September, and there are growing concerns in the U.S. that AIM for Climate could be overshadowed by ongoing food-production reform projects in the 193-nation body.



Bill Hohenstein, USDA

While the U.S. is focusing on goals like “scientific breakthroughs via basic agricultural research through national-level government agricultural R&D and academic research institutions” through AIM for Climate, the UN has also launched five separate “action tracks,” aimed at big reforms like changing the way the world eats.

One such track is chaired by Norway's Gunhild Stordalen, founder and executive chair of the EAT Foundation, a nonprofit organization behind the movement to drastically reduce the amount of meat consumed around the world.

The EAT-Lancet Diet proposes “a more than doubling in the consumption of healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, legumes and nuts, and a greater than 50% reduction in global consumption of less healthy foods such as added sugars and red meat (i.e., primarily by reducing excessive consumption in wealthier countries).”

Stordalen, after being named a leader of one of the action tracks, said, “International summits rarely change the world by themselves, and especially not now given the global political climate. Our goal is, therefore, to take full advantage of the Summit to build an unstoppable global movement for change that we can keep growing well beyond the Summit, to force the kinds of far-reaching changes that the world now desperately needs.”

Hohenstein says he understands there is angst in the U.S. over some of the work at the United Nations by the action tracks, but he also stressed that AIM for Climate is completely independent of that work. Furthermore, a separate team at USDA will be keeping track of all the work that is being done at the UN.

“There’s a team at USDA that’s heavily engaged in preparations for the Food Systems Summit and understands the contributions that U.S. agriculture can make to improve food security globally,” he said. “We’re going to be paying close attention to everything that happens in the run-up to the Food Systems Summit, including the work on the action tracks.”

As for AIM for Climate, the effort holds strong potential to benefit both U.S. farmers and farmers around the world — especially farmers in countries that don't have enough money to do much research on their own.

“There are countries that have specific technologies like Israel, which has done a tremendous amount of work on water-use efficiency,” Hohenstein said. “It’s not like U.S. companies have all the answers.”

But there’s also a lot the U.S. can share to help improve productivity and reliance for farmers around the world.

Gregg Doud, former chief agricultural negotiator at the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and now chief economist for Aimpoint Research, says the world needs to emphasize innovation. **“If we’re going to feed over 9 billion people on this planet by 2050, we have to use technology in agriculture to do that, he said. “We can’t go backwards. There are a lot of countries in the world that are interested in adopting new technologies for agriculture.”**

One of those countries is the UAE.

"The AIM for Climate collaborative initiative focuses on a sector that has been historically overlooked when it comes to climate action," UAE Minister for Industry and Advanced Technology Sultan Al Jaber said in a statement. "By investing in innovation and technology in the agricultural sector, we can unlock opportunities for effective mitigation and adaptation, feed growing populations in resource-stressed areas, and create economic growth."



Gregg Doud, Aimpoint

But there will need to be a lot of work to prepare for the actual implementation of an effective platform like the one that’s being proposed in AIM for Climate, says David Blandford, professor emeritus at the Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences.

“In terms of implementation, that’s where the rubber hits the road,” he said. “What’s needed is an internationally coordinated approach that establishes what the priorities are and then ... allocates those priorities across countries or institutions that are best able to deal with them.”

News Briefs:

New report captures how the pandemic changed grocery shopping. Prior to Covid-19, American consumers were spending more on food away from home than ever before. For example, the \$931 billion consumers spent on overall food away from home expenditures in 2018 exceeded food at home expenditures by nearly \$150 billion, according to USDA’s Economic Research Service. However, as the American public grappled with the pandemic and stayed at home or social distanced during much of 2020, much of that trend reversed. Today, 58% of shoppers report eating more at home and nearly half (49%) report cooking or preparing their own meals more than before the pandemic. When it comes to grocery shopping to support these at-home meals, shoppers have a newfound appreciation for the task, with 42% saying they like or love to grocery shop, according to FMI — The Food Industry Association. The organization, in partnership with The Hartman Group, identified these trends in their new annual report, [“U.S. Grocery Shopper Trends 2021”](#). “Throughout this past year, American grocery consumers have developed a deeper relationship with their kitchens, increased their healthy eating consciousness, and have learned new ways to shop,” FMI President and CEO Leslie Sarasin said. “We see shoppers engaging in more stock-up trips to support their at-home

cooking, exercising new online shopping skills, and letting their personal concept of being well impact their food and shopping behaviors. Looking ahead, we expect many of these trends to continue.” In addition, the report found that the number of online grocery shoppers grew to nearly two-thirds (64%) of all U.S. adults, with newcomers from every generation. Frequency of online grocery shopping also increased, with more than one-fourth (29%) of online shoppers placing a weekly order. For the first time, many more online grocery shoppers now consider a mass retailer to be their primary store. FMI also found that “shoppers’ concept of being well involves an interlocking, circular relationship among the domains of shopping, cooking and eating and this phenomenon helps us understand shoppers’ engagement with the evolving retail landscape.”

Organic sales break records in 2020. U.S. organic sales topped \$60 billion for the first time in 2020 and more than doubled the sales growth rate the industry experienced in 2019, the Organic Trade Association said in a report released Tuesday. According to OTA's *2021 Organic Industry Survey*, which tracks sales of organic food and non-food products, U.S. organic sales were about \$61.9 in 2020, a growth rate of 12.4% over the 2019 figures. The association attributed most of the growth to a huge bump in home cooking brought about by the pandemic. Organic food sales accounted for \$56.4 billion of total sales. Organic produce sales grew by 11% and frozen and canned organic fruit and vegetable sales grew by 28%. More than 15% of fruits and vegetables sold in the U.S. are now organic, according to OTA. Additionally, “meal support” products contributed to the spike in the organic sales growth rate: Organic sauces and spices had a growth rate of 33% and organic spices observed a growth rate of 51%. OTA noted organic non-food products did not see the same exceptional growth but remained largely steady. Angela Jagiello, OTA's director of education and insights, said “The only thing that constrained growth in the organic food sector was supply.” She detailed that, due to the pandemic, not only were ingredients taxed but there was a shortage of packaging for the products, making it difficult for producers to meet consumer demand. OTA CEO and Executive Director Laura Batcha said the COVID-19 pandemic brought about “a renewed awareness of the importance of maintaining our health, and the important role of nutritious food. For more and more consumers, that means organic.” OTA does not predict organic food sales will continue at the same record-breaking rate, but does expect organic sales to remain strong in 2021.

Ag and forestry coalition defend gray wolf delisting. A coalition of agriculture and forestry groups filed court documents last week arguing the gray wolf has sufficiently recovered and no longer needs to be listed under the Endangered Species Act. The coalition, which includes the American Farm Bureau Federation, American Forest Resource Council, American Sheep Industry Association, National Cattlemen's Beef Association, and Public Lands Council, moved to intervene in three lawsuits challenging the delisting, filed by environmental groups in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. In November 2020, the Fish and Wildlife Service delisted the gray wolf in the continental United States because its population had reached conservation goals, but conservation and animal welfare groups contend the service’s data do not show that the wolf has recovered in all states. The coalition is defending the delisting because “it recognizes the successful recovery of the wolf, and enables responsible wildlife management and protection of private property by farmers, ranchers, and forest resource users,” according to a statement put out by the American Farm Bureau Federation. The coalition presented personal stories to the court about the effects of an unchecked gray wolf population on livestock ranchers and farmers, as well as on other wildlife. Joe Wilebski, a cattle producer from Minnesota, said he lost 26 calves to gray wolves in only one year, and the depredation stresses his calves, reducing their economic viability. According to the AFBF, the gray wolf population has exceeded recovery goals by more than 300%. AFBF President Zippy Duvall said, “with the gray wolf population now thriving, it is time to celebrate this success and turn management over to the states, which can oversee the species in a way that is most appropriate for each region.”

Farm Hands West: United Fresh elects Dumas as chairman

Danny Dumas has been elected to serve as the chairman of the United Fresh Board of Directors. Dumas currently serves as the president of Courchesne Larose USA. He succeeds **Michael Muzyk**, president of Baldor Specialty Foods, who served as chairman last year and led the association through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Marc Beoshanz has been hired by Legend Produce, Scottsdale, Ariz., to be the new farming operations manager. Beoshanz previously worked the last 14 years at HM Clause Seed Company where he was a regional manager.

Nicole Negowetti has joined the Plant Based Foods Association as the new senior director of policy. Before joining PBFA, Negowetti served as a clinical instructor and lecturer on law at Harvard Law School, where she worked at the Animal Law and Policy Clinic and the Food Law and Policy Clinic in the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation.

USDA has appointed **Terry Cosby** as chief of the Natural Resources Conservation Service and **Meryl Harrell** as Deputy Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment (NRE). Harrell most recently served as the executive director of the Southern Appalachian

Wilderness Stewards. Cosby started his career with USDA in 1979 as a student trainee in Iowa. He most recently served as the acting chief of NRCS and was the state conservationist for Ohio. To read more on the appointments, check out [previous coverage on Agri-Pulse.com](https://www.agripulse.com)



Nicole Negowetti



Terry Cosby

USDA has brought on **Kim Peyser**, **Tien Nguyen**, and **Katie Zenk** to its staff in senior staff leadership positions. Peyser has been named the new deputy assistant secretary for administration. She most recently served as the deputy chief of staff at the Department of Commerce. Nguyen will serve as the deputy director of scheduling and advance in the office of the secretary. She was most recently an advance associate in the executive office of the president. Previously, she served as the advance lead on the Biden-Harris transition team and was the national advance lead and studio producer on the Biden for President campaign. Zenk was hired to be chief of staff for Marketing and Regulatory Programs. She comes to USDA from Capitol Hill where she was the staff director of the Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign Agriculture, full Committee economist, and professional staff during consideration of the 2018 Farm Bill on the House Agriculture Committee.

Margaret Zeigler has been tapped to serve as the interim president of the Supporters of Agricultural Research (SoAR) Foundation after founding President **Thomas Grumbly** announced he will retire June 14. Grumbly will become chairman of the SoAR Board on the same date he retires. He has served as president of SoAR since 2014. Zeigler joins the SoAR

team after serving as the executive director of the Global Harvest Initiative, which focuses on improving agricultural productivity around the world. [To read more on Zeigler, see this article on Agri-Pulse.com.](#)

Daniel Vennard, former global director at the World Resources Institute, will join the Syngenta Group as the new chief sustainability officer on July 26, based in Basel, Switzerland. Before joining the World Resources Institute, Vennard worked for 15 years at Mars Incorporated and Procter & Gamble in corporate strategy, sustainability and marketing. **Petra Laux**, who served as acting chief sustainability officer, will take on the role of head of business sustainability for Syngenta Crop Protection.

Claire Dailey has joined FLM Harvest as the new vice president of public relations. Dailey brings 15 years of communications and public relations experience to the position. She most recently worked at Periscope where she was a public relations account director. She succeeds Heidi Nelson, who recently transitioned from executive vice president to a member of the FLM Harvest board of advisers.

Nichino America (NAI) promoted **Jeffrey Johnson** to chief executive officer in addition to his current position of president. Johnson has also been promoted to managing executive officer of Nihon Nohyaku Company, the parent company of NAI. Johnson joined Nichino Group in 1997 as the commercial development manager of Nihon Nohyaku America, predecessor company of NAI. He was named vice president of the



Daniel Vennard

newly formed NAI in 2001 and assumed the position of president in 2002. **Dustin Simmons** has been promoted to the newly created role of commercial vice president. Simmons joined NAI in 2008 and has held various positions within the company. Lastly, NAI has elevated **Lydia Cox** to vice president of regulatory and scientific affairs for NAI. Cox joined NAI in 2013 as director of regulatory affairs.

Glenn David has been tapped to be the executive vice president and group president of Zoetis. David previously was the executive vice president and chief financial officer. In his new role, David will oversee Zoetis' international operations, and will also be responsible for the company's aquaculture business, Global BioDevices, and Pumpkin Pet Insurance. Zoetis has also added **Wetteny Joseph** to succeed David as executive vice president and chief financial officer. Joseph comes to Zoetis after a 13-year career in the health care industry, working for Catalent, a global leader in pharmaceuticals, biologics and consumer health products.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman **David Scott** has brought on **Katherine Stewart** and **Detrick Manning** to the majority staff. Stewart will serve as the Subcommittee Staff Director for the Nutrition, Oversight, and Department Operations Subcommittee. She previously worked for Rep. Alma Adams', D-N.C., office where she served as legislative director. Manning is the new press secretary for the committee. Manning most recently served as communications deputy for Mayor **Robert Garcia** of Long Beach, Calif.

Chairman Scott has also promoted **Malikha Daniels** as the subcommittee staff director for the Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research. Daniels previously served as a policy analyst on the committee.



Lorren Walker

Lorren Walker has started his own consulting firm, EliasWalker. Walker previously served as the chief of staff to Greg Ibach during his time as USDA undersecretary of marketing and regulatory programs during the Trump administration. Walker brings 20 years of experience in the agriculture and consulting area.

Connor Hamburg will join Nutrien as the manager of government and industry affairs, effective June 1. Hamburg currently serves as the Renewable Fuels Association's director of government affairs.

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture hired **Tandy Kidd** as manager of events and member engagement and **Maria Martinez** as coordinator of programs and grants for the NASDA Foundation. Kidd most recently served as special

project manager for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture. Martinez most recently served as a graduate teaching assistant for the University of Georgia and has experience working with Kansas Corn, Yum Brands Co. and the National FFA Organization.

Ivory Harris has been named senior vice president and chief human resources officer for AGCO. Harris joins AGCO after a 17-year career at BASF, where she most recently was vice president, People - U.S.

Steve Drake passed away surrounded by family on May 22 after a battle with Idiopathic Pulmonary Fibrosis. Drake received his Bachelor of Science degree in agricultural economics and his Master of Arts degree in international journalism from Ohio State. The Ohio native started his career working for The Associated Press. He then served as the communications coordinator at Ohio State University and also served as director of public relations and sports information director at Albion College. Later in his career, he served as executive vice president of the American Soybean Association from 1978 to 1992 and was the president of Drake and Company from 1992 to 2011. He received the Summit Award from the American Society of Association Executives and is a member of the Agricultural Public Relations Hall of Fame.

**Best regards,
Sara Wyant
Editor**

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