

## The pandemic is reshaping geopolitics, and citrus growers stand to benefit

Most countries will never recover to the economic status they had before the pandemic struck, according to geopolitical analyst and author Peter Zeihan. This means the California citrus industry's primary competitors are likely "going to vanish from the market."

Zeihan, delivering a keynote speech last week for California Citrus Mutual's Citrus Showcase, delivered three warnings to growers. Globalization, he said, isn't ending but is already over. Recovery from COVID-19 is "almost upon us," but only for North America, and the rest of the world may not have a recovery. Import-export markets for the U.S. industry's competitors are going to get "a lot more simplified" in the years to come. Countries that are long-term customers for California citrus have a bright future, while the competition does not.



*Citrus trees*

**"The rules of the game as we understand them—as we have built our businesses for the last 60 years—are changing," said Zeihan. "Because the world has evolved beyond what we understand."**

He argued the U.S. is the least globally involved economy in the world and the bipartisanship needed to bump up the country's level of engagement disappeared years ago. The Trump administration, by prioritizing trade deals for South Korea, Japan, Mexico, Canada and the UK, combined with the coronavirus, changed trade relationships overnight. The country's energy independence will also lead to stable prices for pesticides and fertilizers, while producers in the rest of the world "are going to face extraordinary challenges."

**Lemon growers, however, will still see rising competition from Argentina, Chile and South Africa. For the primary competition to orange growers, Egypt and Spain, "the short version is they're screwed."**

In a follow-up panel discussion, grower Jim Finch called the Argentinian competition “very real and fairly new to us in lemons.”

“We know we have competition and we've been facing it for the last few years. But it sounds like it's only going to get worse,” said Finch, adding that the closing of restaurants during the pandemic led to one the industry’s worst years in over a decade.

Zeihan projected that a recession in China would cause their whole agricultural system, which is heavily subsidized, to fall apart. He encouraged commodity groups to explore new relationships in Southeast Asia—particularly Vietnam—as replacement markets for China.

**“If you don't do it soon, the Australians and the New Zealanders will beat you to it,” he cautioned. “So get in early, bring a fruit basket, bring a lot of bourbon, make friends.”**

Keith Watkins, vice president of farming for Bee Sweet Citrus, was concerned to hear Zeihan say the market in China is going to implode in a year. “We're seeing other opportunities in exports in Southeast Asia and in some of these developing countries,” said Watkins. “But we have put a lot of time into China.”

Zeihan also expects relations with Europeans “to take a very dark turn very early in Biden’s term, certainly this year.”

As far as labor issues, the traditional methods for tree fruit industries of hiring guest workers from Mexico and Central America are not going to work much longer. While that could happen years from now, Zeihan urged farmers to start planning for something else and even consider sponsoring refugees, if the political mood is right.

Another concern with Mexico, he explained, is that cartels have largely taken over citrus distribution in the country, which will be challenging for the U.S. to wrestle with in the bilateral relationship.

**One surprise outcome from the geopolitical shifts may be that agriculture’s voice in Sacramento could grow stronger as the tech industry faces a significant economic challenge in the “de-globalization” process.**



Geopolitical analyst and author Peter Zeihan

“That will probably be of a net benefit for you,” said Zeihan. “All of a sudden, the attraction of going to the coast isn't going to be there.”

With the need for a “rationalization” on water usage in California, he urged the industry to take the lead in how the state manages surface and groundwater resources.

Beyond the global issues, California Citrus Mutual Chairman Matt Fisher warned that farming costs have gone up 75% in the last 10 years. “My message and my challenge to growers,” said Fisher, “is do your part and redevelop.”

He encouraged growers to work with their marketing team to find solutions and to not let the natural forces of market dynamics drive up costs. “We know where that ends up,” said Fisher. “We're going to go broke that way. Or we're going to get in front of it.”

## Microplastics in California's agricultural soils could be hurting crop production, or worse

Microplastics are polluting waterways and soils in California and the Legislature is considering actions to curb this trend.

Among the many sources contributing to the problem are biosolids. Treatment plants filter out nearly all the microplastics from wastewater, and that pollution is often processed into sewage sludge. This nutrient-rich biosolid is frequently applied as compost in agriculture, which can spread the microplastics into the topsoil. Researchers worry this problem has grown in scale so much that it may be a threat to national food security.



Microplastics in soil

**“We're seeing new data out every day and new studies just on impacts on agricultural soils from synthetics,”** said Senator Henry Stern at an informational committee hearing on the issue last week. **“It's a myriad and confounding issue.”**

Agriculture has also been in the spotlight as a contributor to California's plastic waste problem. Materials like mulch film, tarps and single-use plastic containers can degrade into smaller particles that stay in the environment. This was the subject of a two-year legislative battle to drastically reduce the amount of single-use packaging in the state, with two bills narrowly failing to garner enough political support to pass. Food and agricultural companies have invested heavily into research and development for alternative packaging options to transition away from single-use plastics.

The issue of microplastics in soils, however, is just beginning to be understood. Scott Coffin, a research scientist at the State Water Resources Control Board, explained to the environmental safety committee that a recent study has found as much as 300,000 tons of microplastics enter agricultural soils across North America every year.

**“We know that plants may uptake and accumulate small microplastics through their roots,”** said Coffin. **“However, more research is needed to determine what impacts to agriculture exist.”**

He added that the evidence is limited to only a few studies. One from 2020 showed microplastics can reduce plant growth due to root damage and decrease the number of mature tomatoes a plant produces.

**“It's clear that we cannot depend entirely on wastewater treatment to solve the issue of microplastics pollution,”** said Coffin. **“Doing so may create additional problems with accumulation in agricultural fields.”**

With plastics increasingly found in drinking water, the Legislature took action in 2018 by passing Senate Bill 1422. It required the state water board to define the sort of pollution that would fall under the umbrella of microplastics.

“This contaminant suite is incredibly diverse in the number of particle shapes, sizes, colors and associated contaminants that occur within this universe of microplastics,” said Coffin.

The definition includes chemicals from plastic polymers that have been shown to disrupt the endocrine system. One type of chemical found in flame retardant has caused more intellectual disabilities in the U.S. than pesticides, mercury and lead combined, according to Coffin, who added that these health burdens have totaled more than \$3 trillion in economic damages.



Wastewater treated sludge being applied as compost.

High levels of microplastics have been found in the San Francisco Bay due to fibers stripped from clothes in washing machines that enter wastewater, as well as fibers from tires washed from roads into the stormwater system.

Alexis Jackson, a research director at The Nature Conservancy, said the presence of microfibers in agriculture has the same impact on soil and crop production as drought conditions. She worried these microplastics are being consumed as well.

**“This is the first time I’ve heard this,” said Committee Chair Bill Quirk of Hayward, in responding to Coffin’s presentation. “And it is scarier than I thought it would be.”**

The new definition developed in 2020 set the research process in motion for analyzing the problem and for considering further guidance from the state water board for protecting the health of Californians. The board will adopt a four-year plan for further testing and analysis by July.

“It’s hard to see what kind of solution we can have to this other than banning plastics,” said Quirk. “We need to know what can be done today.”

## **One year later: Ag worker challenges continue 12 months into pandemic**

*This story is the second installment 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. Last week’s story focused on the rural broadband impact of the virus.*

Many ag jobs were designated “essential” at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. A year later, masks and other safety precautions have become common in farm fields and packing houses. Food continues to move from the farm to the consumer. But impacts on the people making that happen have been significant.

Chuck Conner, president and CEO of the National Council of Farm Cooperatives, said his members saw right away that to keep operations functioning they would need to keep up with the latest information, which was changing almost daily.

**“They knew their employees were essential, but at the same time,” he said, in the early days and weeks of the pandemic people “did not understand the breadth and the depth of this disease.” NCFC shifted its focus from legislative and regulatory issues to putting out COVID updates as across the country, “everybody relied heavily upon their trade associations.”**

Farmworkers got the message that they needed to keep working, but the rest of the details were often slow to come. Advocates for California field workers also shifted their focus to address immediate needs. Hernan Hernandez, executive director of the California Farmworker Foundation, said his group quickly began distributing masks and other personal protective equipment — 750,000 items handed out to date — and, in time, was able to set up testing sites at farm locations.

“We did see an increase in regard to COVID-19 education and PPE as the pandemic was expanding,” he said, and the foundation helped translate information into multiple languages to reach more workers.



*Essential ag workers have been on the job throughout the pandemic.  
Photo courtesy of UC Davis*

Early on, meat processing plants bore the brunt of the outbreaks in food and agriculture. In May, meat plant workers had much higher rates of infection than the overall population, but during the summer and fall surges in the general population, meat plant cases per capita weren't as high, as illustrated by this graph from the North American Meat Institute showing New York Times national case counts and The FERN's meat plant counts.

Unions representing plant workers were outspoken with criticism of plant owners through much of 2020, alleging, for example, slow or inadequate implementation of safety measures. But in December, the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union and NAMI jointly called upon governors to prioritize meat and poultry plant workers for vaccination.

"Meat companies are ready and willing to partner with the federal and state governments to provide vaccinations to frontline meat workers," NAMI spokesperson Sarah Little told *Agri-Pulse* in an emailed statement.

On March 5, UFCW announced a partnership that will vaccinate plant employees in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and Texas.

### **One dairy's outbreak**

For dairy farmer Jenni Tilton-Flood of Flood Brothers, LLC, in Clinton, Maine, initial protections for workers included stopping all tours (which typically bring 500-1,000 people to the farm annually) and asking truck drivers and farm staff not to get too close to each other. Farm employees already had paid sick time and used it if they had any symptoms. Then, in November, one worker tested positive. Tilton-Flood said they worked with a mobile testing service to get testing on-site, where they have 31 employees outside of the 21 family members associated with the farm. Ultimately, half of the milking staff had to quarantine, though only six tests were positive.

“We ended up in consultation with our veterinarian and our nutritionist,” she said, and ultimately dropped from 3 to 2 milkings per day, which cut into output and, therefore, profit. It wasn't an easy decision, and the weeks of quarantine were hard on the farm owners and the employees.

**“There was a lot of concern whether they would have a job,” Tilton-Flood said, “and for us, there was a lot of concern whether we would have a farm.” She says the farm received support from the co-op they sell to, the state dairy checkoff program and others.**



*Jenni Tilton-Flood of Flood Brothers, LLC in Clinton, Maine (Photo: Cabot Creamery Cooperative)*

“We’re not organic, and the Maine Organic Milk Producers reached out,” she said, noting her gratitude for the community's support.

The ill workers never developed severe symptoms and there hasn't been another case since. About 1,500 cows are being milked three times a day, again, and no one has lost a job.

## **Field workers**

Across food and ag sectors, employers implemented and employees complied with COVID safety precautions to keep food moving, even though the pathways sometimes changed.

“The need of farmworkers, the priority of farmworkers, the ability to keep a supply chain moving really was highlighted,” especially in the fresh produce sector, Robert Guenther, senior vice president for public policy at the United Fresh Produce Association, said in a presentation at USDA's Ag Outlook Forum last month.

Initially, it seemed outdoor farm work might be slightly safer, but a study from the University of California, Berkeley, School of Public Health found high infection rates in Monterey County field workers. Perhaps more striking than the 42% of study participants who were infected but asymptomatic is the 57% who had symptoms and went to work anyway.

“People didn’t want to stop working,” said Sarait Martinez, executive director of the Binational Center for the Development of Oaxacan Indigenous Communities, which helps people who may only speak their native Indigenous language. Martinez said testing was a challenge for myriad reasons, including access and the fact that workers feared if they tested positive they would lose their jobs. Now, the vaccine is starting to change the dynamic.

## **Vaccines**

**“There’s a shift,” Martinez said, from fear to hope. Many workers and employers see vaccination as the key to reaching a post-pandemic era.**

The vaccine, Martinez said, “is that piece that we share in common. Everyone wants it.”

But misinformation and myths about the vaccine are widespread in farmworker communities.

“We really want to make sure that we’re encouraging people, when it’s their turn, to get the vaccine,” said Nayamin Martinez, director of the Central California Environmental Justice Network (and no relation to Sarait Martinez).

Heather Riden is with the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at UC-Davis, which has long worked to ensure ag workers get accurate information, a need that grew during the pandemic and has been exacerbated as vaccines have rolled out. Farmworker advocates say myths around vaccine safety and efficacy are rampant and run the full gamut of what is circulating on social media. Riden says one strategy to combat vaccine hesitancy is for workers to get vaccine information from the same people who speak their language and have provided them with masks and hand sanitizer for the past year. Those groups have been on the ground deepening trust with workers throughout the pandemic.

“They’ve been doing that, oftentimes, not paid,” she said, “just providing service to their community.” In California, the state-funded COVID-19 Statewide Agriculture and Farmworker Education Program, coordinated through the Western Center, is expanding education efforts and getting money to some of those organizations. The project will produce materials in six different languages and multiple formats — posters, audio files, videos — and distribute them through multiple channels to reach as many workers as possible.



*A farmworker in California is tested for COVID-19. (Photo courtesy of UC-Davis)*

Already in California, some farms are welcoming vaccination clinics. Other states, like Florida, have come under fire for not providing enough vaccinations to essential farmworkers.

**A Purdue University dashboard estimates nearly a half million cases of COVID-19 among ag workers nationwide, with the largest numbers in California and Texas, each of which has tallied more than 45,000 cases. Traveling to work together and living in multigenerational homes with people doing essential work in different places may contribute to spread.**

"We live in such a close-knit family network that once the virus is in the community, it's there," Sarait Martinez said.

## **H-2A visas**

Changes have also come for workers who travel to the United States on H-2A visas. They now get a little more space to live in, for example.

“I think that’s a positive,” Hernandez said, and though it was enacted to allow some distance during the pandemic, he hopes the change outlasts COVID-19.

Getting into the United States became more difficult for H-2A workers, though. NCFC's Conner said when the State Department told staff around the world to work from home, a big question loomed about required in-person visa interviews.

“We thought we were in a tremendous jam,” he said. But then many groups and employers worked together and came up with a proposal the State Department was able to adopt that allowed for virtual interviews with visa applicants. Ultimately, more H-2A workers entered the country in 2020 than in 2019. Conner said he'd like to see the interview flexibility continue, though whether it will remain is unknown.

Then, when the South African variant led the United States to block arrivals from that country, “we intervened, lots of us, in a big way,” Conner said, to get those essential ag workers in.

“The administration at that particular time chose to grant exemptions for those workers coming in from South Africa,” he said.

### **Pandemic lessons**

Riden hopes the community groups that work directly with employees will continue to play a strong role in connecting vulnerable workers to reliable information. The Binational Center has grown from a staff of seven to 25 in the past year and Sarait Martinez said she's hiring 10 more people.

For Tilton-Flood, the crisis of having COVID-19 burst her family's farm bubble "has proven to us, this is what we want to do." And it's prompted the family to have important, necessary but difficult conversations about farm succession. After a year of pandemic, she's thankful all the family members are still around to have those discussions.

Conner is confident the country has seen that, in the face of a new and huge challenge, agriculture and its workforce came through. He hopes that will be remembered.

“People were fed,” he said. “We’ve got a remarkable system.”

### **How Biden plans to sell skeptical rural Americans on the COVID vaccine**

Getting America back to normal means getting most of the country vaccinated, and polls suggest that's going to be especially hard in rural areas, where many residents aren't sold on the safety of the shots or convinced they need them.

But in an interview with *Agri-Pulse*, President Joe Biden's top COVID-19 advisers say they believe that hesitancy will fade over time as rural Americans hear from doctors and other people they trust about the vaccine and see their peers being vaccinated safely.

Also critical: Making the shots more widely available in areas that are long distances from current vaccination sites such as pharmacies.

**“We're not in the frame (of mind) where we think that we're gonna have lots of people refusing. We think we've got people who want to learn more” about the vaccine, said Andy Slavitt, the White House's senior adviser on the COVID-19 response.**



“The stakes are obviously that there will continue to be ongoing transmission (of the virus) in communities that don’t have high levels of vaccination,” he said.



*Andy Slavitt, White House*

The administration has been holding information sessions with hospitals and other providers and has also reached out to state agriculture commissioners and a number of rural-based organizations, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, National Farmers Union, National Rural Health Association, Federation of Southern Cooperatives, Network of Black Farm Organizations and Advocates and the United Farm Workers Foundation.

**"The key is just making sure that we're casting a broad net to hear from everywhere, and also to get information back about what we're doing to try to make sure that every community has access to all three of these vaccines," said Cameron Webb, the White House senior adviser for COVID-19 equity.**

To set up vaccination sites in more remote rural areas, the White House intends to fund up to 500 mobile health units around the country. The closure of rural hospitals over recent years has added to the challenge, Webb said. The administration is working through states to ensure local communities identify the best sites, possibly through local organizations or churches, to administer vaccinations.

"You have to find creative and different ways to get to those people," Webb said. Recent surveys of public interest in the vaccines illustrate the challenge the administration is facing. A [Pew Research poll](#) found just 60% of rural residents are planning to get vaccinated or already have been. That’s compared to 73% of suburban residents and 70% of urban dwellers.

A [Kaiser Family Foundation poll](#) found nearly four in 10 Republicans and three in 10 rural residents said they will either “definitely not” get vaccinated or will do so “only if required.” One-third of essential workers in fields other than health care also don’t want to get the vaccine.

**"We've got too many people that are still hesitant," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters recently. "We've got to break the barriers down to that hesitancy. We have to make sure people understand that to get on the other side, open things totally back up with confidence, to get schools reopened with confidence, to allow us to go to a ballgame, to do the things we did before COVID struck, we've got to get enough of us vaccinated."**



*Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack*

USDA is trying to increase rural vaccination rates by offering its facilities, cold chain infrastructure, public health experts, disaster response specialists, and footprint in rural areas and tribal communities across the country. The department also has deployed over 450 USDA personnel to assist with speeding up the process to get vaccines to Americans.

Keith Mueller, director of the Rural Policy Research Institute's Center for Rural Health Policy Analysis, told *Agri-Pulse* there are two questions that need to be answered in order to truly get ahead of the pandemic: **What communication mechanisms do you use to spread the message on the importance of the vaccine, and how do you convince someone that getting the vaccine is vital to ending the pandemic?**

“I'm not convinced we've done a good job of understanding the answers to those two questions. And if we need to get to as high of percentages as what we're reading, in terms of reaching the point where we're confident we've got a good blockage on the spreading of the pandemic, we need answers to those questions,” said Mueller.

To be sure, some rural states are leading the way in getting residents vaccinated. New Mexico is administering doses at a rate of 39,769 per 100,000 residents, the nation's highest, followed by South Dakota at 36,881 and North Dakota at 36,216, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

There are rural counties where vaccination rates are actually quite high. Some 47% of residents in Hamilton County, N.Y. (population 4,420) and Miller County, Ga., (population 5,720) have received at least one dose of the vaccine, according to the website CovidActNow.org.

Shawnda Schroeder, associate director for the Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota medical school, said her state has been working to ensure that rural residents hear from local, trusted sources that the vaccine is safe and that they should get it.



*Shawnda Schroeder*

**“The one thing we know that will work in our rural communities is if they're hearing about it from their rural doc or from their rural providers or from a rural friend, somebody who also lives in the rural community who received the vaccine, and it went well for them,” she said.**

The White House understands the need to ensure that rural residents are hearing from local sources, and is trying to be supportive of rural health care providers, according to Slavitt.

**“People are smart enough to think for themselves. They don't want to feel manipulated. They want to talk to the type of people that they know and that they trust,” he said.**

Slavitt emphasized that taking the vaccine is a matter of personal choice. “We just want everybody to have all the facts and make sure they have all their questions answered.”

In central Wisconsin, rural health care systems have seen a demand for the vaccine, especially with the older population, but have struggled with signing up patients in rural areas for vaccine appointments due to rural broadband issues.

“It is harder in the rural areas due to connectivity,” said Tammy Simon, vice president of the Institute for Quality, Innovation and Patient Safety under the Marshfield Clinic Health System. “We do not have a large population, but we do have a very aged population.”

She said the MCHS uses a survey system to schedule vaccine appointments. When patients do not have internet, MCHS has had them call the hospital, and staff members have filled out the survey to get them on the list.

There is still a shortage of vaccines, however.

"We receive an average of 2,000 first doses weekly, and we have approximately 29,000 eligible adults on our waiting list," she said. "We receive only a fraction of what we request. We have enough staff trained to provide up to 16,000 vaccines every week. We trained retired staff and existing staff to accomplish this."

## **Popular musician Jason Mraz nurtures creativity on the farm, advocates for climate and young farmers**

Singer-songwriter Jason Mraz has multiple hits and Grammy awards from his music career, but he also grows avocados and coffee commercially and has dozens of other fruit trees on his farm in Oceanside, California. It began when he bought a 1970s-era avocado grove. Area farmers advised him to diversify and he saw that coffee might be an up and coming crop. "And being as my career began in coffee shops, and I love coffee culture, it seemed like the perfect fit," he said. "It also required a good amount of risk taking. And I know too, that I'm in the position where I can take those risks."

Last month, at a California Assembly ag committee informal hearing, Mraz testified in favor of establishing carbon sequestration credits for agriculture, on-farm carbon capture projects, and a climate resiliency bond.

He spoke with *Agri-Pulse* on March 1<sup>st</sup>.

### **Why did you choose to testify at an assembly hearing when you have your own public platform?**

This was an opportunity to speak to policymakers and that's where real change also has to occur. Yes, it has to occur on the consumer level and on the homeowner level. But it has to definitely happen at the state level, and even the national level, to help farmers get the credits that they need and the incentives they need to do more organic and regenerative and sustainable farming, to increase wages for laborers, to help growers get a better price for their crops. [...] The testimony was on behalf of the (California) Avocado Commission for a number of causes in relation to regenerative agriculture, both regeneratively for the planet and the topsoil, and the sort of perennial trees that avocados are, helping to improve air quality, create a hedge against wildfires, draw carbon down, etc.



*Grammy award-winner Jason Mraz grows avocados and coffee commercially in Oceanside, California.*

Regeneration also has to occur for farmer legacies. There aren't enough young farmers today to replace retiring farmers and that's a real threat to agriculture in the United States. So at the state level, there needs to be some more incentives. I would say carbon credits, or tax credits, or

however it wants to play out, to allow young people to move into agriculture and fulfill their passion and not have to have a second job the way most farmers do.

**Talk to me a little bit more about how carbon credits would be a piece of being able to get more young farmers on the land. How are those things intertwined?**

Right now, you hear (about carbon credits) around curbing fossil fuel emissions and basically other industries. They saying if you can curb your emissions, if you can change your ways to help the environment, we can give you some carbon credits, or we can give you some tax incentives to help your business while you make these changes. And nothing yet is happening in agriculture, where if we did (have something), farmers could have programs that helped train them in regenerative and sustainable agriculture (and) helped to sustain them while they do these transitional practices. Ultimately, the environment would become a more productive place in the future. But to get there, farmers are going to have to train their field workers, they're going to have to change some of their practices and all of that it's going to be very, very costly. So having incentives and credits would, I believe, look more appealing to a family that's getting involved in farming. They look at the startup cost, [it's] astronomical. I have to assume most farmers are going to go to a bank and get a loan for either their land or their crop that they're starting. And they're going to live in debt most of the time. But if they know that that debt can be written off fast, or that debt could be offset by a credit or an incentive from the state, then more people are more likely to stay involved in farming.

**What kind of confidence do you have in agriculture broadly, that farmers will do whatever is appropriate on their own farms to contribute to climate goals?**

In general, I'm optimistic. In the small cases that I've seen, just through Kiss the Ground, the movie, there is that multispecies, biodiversity rebirth on a piece of land that has been basically given over to restoration or regeneration management that makes it easier going forward for the future of the farmer.

Now, I shouldn't say makes it easier because once you go regenerative, organic or biodiverse, you're basically inviting multiple species to grow in a spot versus one species of food. Multispecies can be very, very expensive. It can cost a lot of money just to weed a large acreage of property and most farmers don't want to add that to their workload. But with regenerative, and with this training, comes the ability to identify how biodiversity, multispecies growing, is actually better for the crops you're growing, better for the future of the land you're growing on, better for the air, better for the earth because it's got plant material plugged into the soil. Again, drawing carbon down, so bringing in the carbon credits to add something farmers have never had to think about. If they were told, "hey, if you keep your land green, we'll give you some extra dough for that because you're gonna have to work harder when you need to remove that green around your food," it would be an incentive to keep that property green. [...] If we were just telling people to do a certain thing, there'd be resistance. But you tell them and you give them incentives, you give them a huge tax break, give them coupons ... I don't know how it's gonna work.

## **How do you think your musical career and your farming career influence each other?**

Farming has taught me patience in music. I've had the pleasure of writing a song and letting it grow, nurturing it. "I'm yours," for instance. I wrote it in 2004, I started playing it around 2005, 2006 a little more. By 2007 it was becoming very popular, just (through) word of mouth and through MySpace and through audience sharing. And by 2008, I finally put it out in the world. That very much resembles the life of a fruit tree. Plant something, water it, prune it, feed it, nurture it, see what it wants to be and then about 4 or 5 years in, it kind of arrives at its earliest maturity. I've noticed that now when I make music, I'm okay to let things breathe, let projects grow, let projects develop. And 4, 5 years in, that song or that idea can reach maturity. That's comforting because previously in the music industry, or in any industry, it's about short gains. It's about what can I do this season? Or how fast can I earn something? What is progress? But nature has its own version of progress and it takes a lot of time. So, I've learned a lot through farming about how to manage myself and my other creative projects that I do indoors. I also learned that there there's seasons for everything. In the winter, it's really a season of rest, let things heal, maybe even let the planet (rest) or let the farmer dream a little bit. In the spring, throw out your feed, throw out your ideas, do your trials and that's kind of, for me, the writing and creativity part. Like, let's, come up with 100 ideas. By summertime, you can see which ones are really flourishing, so let's work on those, let's bring those to fruition. Let's even harvest them at the end of summer and then take them to market in the fall. And that too kind of mimics what the musician/songwriter/producer is capable of doing. Then follow that up with a period of rest. (Do) not work full time, all the time, but kind of see the seasons of creativity, nourishing those ideas and then harvesting those ideas and then take them to market. And then rest and repeat.

### **You consider farming among your creative projects, as opposed to other than a creative project?**

Farming is also a bit of landscaping and the way we farm, too, we're perennial trees. So, when we plant a tree, it's there until someone else after us chooses to either remove it or cut it down. We're planting trees to outlive us and in that you're essentially designing a landscape or even a botanical garden. As much biodiversity as we have here, it feels more like a botanical garden than it does a traditional farm or fruit orchard. And that is such a beautiful, creative joy, to imagine the different colored flowers and where you want certain fruits to grow or sometimes just letting the rays of the sun dictate where certain things are going to be planted. It's definitely a creative process because you have to work in harmony with nature.



*Musician, farmer, activist Jason Mraz*

### **We're coming up on a year now that you have not been touring, performing for groups. What will you do differently now that you've spent a year essentially just on the farm?**

I really don't know yet. I do know in the last year I've finally gotten comfortable with the idea of broadcasting from home, reducing my need to move all of my gear from city to city. That seems crazy now. [...] I don't think that's sustainable, ironically. I'm assuming it will happen in some version, but if there's a change, I think it's just going to be less. So, having a little more comfort,

a little more space for everyone, and even space between gigs to give everyone time with their families, time at home, time for themselves. Time is our greatest wealth. So being respectful... the audience's time, if they're gonna come out to see a show, and they're gonna trust us with their time in a public venue, how are we going to honor that? So that's kind of what's on my mind.

## **Sweet surge? Pandemic's easing could spur sugar demand**

The USDA keeps a tight lid on the amount of foreign sugar that enters the U.S., and the department is keeping a close eye on whether it will need to allow more to enter if consumer demand increases as the COVID-19 pandemic loosens its grasp on Americans.

While nothing is certain – especially in the international sugar market – Barbara Fecso, a renowned analyst of sugar and other commodities at USDA, is warning food manufacturers that they should be ready for a possible surge in demand this year and should not wait to get the sugar they'll need.

**“My radar tells me that buyers are slowing down on their orders – delaying them,” Fecso said during this year’s International Sweetener Colloquium. “I don’t blame them. Who knows what this market is going to be with COVID. But my concern is that if the vaccination rate picks up, there could be a surge in demand and we could need more sugar.”**

The end of the pandemic that’s kept people away from restaurants, hotels and ice cream parlors is coming closer into view as the pace of vaccinations increases around the country. That could lead an increase in the consumption of sugar, one of America’s favorite agricultural commodities.

**“Our research shows there’s a pretty high pent-up demand for eating in restaurants,” says Vanessa Sink, a spokeswoman for the National Restaurant Association.**

That has the industry cautiously optimistic after losing business for months.

“We do expect people will come back to restaurants,” she said. “They’ll want to come back to have that social experience that they get and love in restaurants.”



*Rob Johansson, American Sugar Alliance*

Prior to the pandemic, restaurants accounted for about 51 cents of the dollar Americans spent on food, but that has dropped to 45 cents as eateries laid off workers, downsized menus and shifted to carryout or delivery, according to NRA calculations. The restaurant industry lost about \$250 billion in sales between March 2020 and January 2021.

President Joe Biden said last week the U.S. "is now on track to have enough (COVID-19) vaccine supply for every adult in America by the end of May.”

Still, food and candy companies are hesitant to place new orders for sugar because supplies were plentiful in 2020 and there isn't yet evidence of rising demand.

USDA nearly doubled the 2020 tariff rate quota for imports of refined sugar in April of last year by allowing in an extra 181,437 metric tons. On top of that, USDA allowed in an extra 317,515 tons of raw sugar.

That was even more than industrial sugar users in the U.S. had been asking for, and the action was widely lauded by groups like the American Bakers Association as consumer demand for bakery goods in grocery stores spiked. Sugar is the third most important commodity for baked goods behind flour and water.

But demand in the U.S. has been down in recent months, and forecasts still haven't yet raised expectations for 2021.

Nevertheless, Rob Johansson, associate director for the American Sugar Alliance and former USDA chief economist, offered support for Fecso's warning, calling it a "wise observation of the market by someone who's been following it for a long time."

**"Barb's point," he added, "is that even though the outlook says year-over-year demand ... is likely to be down slightly compared to last year, she's sounding a bell that says there's a lot of uncertainty in the forecast and it's still possible that if the economy really gets going ... and there's pent-up demand for taking vacations and going out to restaurants, you may see an increase in demand ... that you have to be ready for."**

And Fecso said there is plenty of sugar on the world market that is available – especially from Mexico.

Every year the USDA sets the quota for U.S. raw sugar imports at about 1.2 million tons, which is the minimum required under U.S. commitments to the World Trade Organization. That quota is filled by many different countries and can be increased, but Mexico – because of the special "suspension agreement" with the U.S. - gets preferential treatment.

But for USDA to increase the import quota, it first needs evidence that demand is increasing, which is why the department is watching closely, said one industry official who asked not to be named because they are not authorized to speak publicly.

## **Report: \$11.5B in lagging facilities hampering US ag research**

Land-grant universities continue to face a huge and costly backlog of deferred infrastructure needs that, left unaddressed, threaten U.S. agricultural competitiveness, according to a new report released by the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities.

The total tab across the 97 institutions is estimated at \$11.5 billion, and the report's analysis "suggests that colleges and schools of agriculture will require a sustaining annual investment of approximately \$550 million each year just to keep deferred maintenance from growing." Just six years ago, Gordian, the company that produced the report, estimated \$8.4 billion in infrastructure and deferred maintenance needs.

**"We have received reports from every type of institution that deteriorating facilities interrupt the pursuit of research and education excellence," Douglas Steele, APLU vice president of food, agriculture and natural resources, said in a prologue to the report. "These challenges on campuses are more than a nuisance: they are a national economic threat."**

“The United States risks losing the ability to compete internationally if we ask our researchers and educators to conduct and deliver 21st century results in facilities from the 1950s and 1960s,” Steele said in a [news release](#). “In order for these institutions to conduct cutting edge research in areas such as food safety and security they need cutting edge research facilities, not buildings with failing utility systems, leaky roofs, and outdated equipment.”

The report pointed to the potential for growth in gross domestic product and boosts in agricultural sustainability and productivity as a result of food and ag research investments. **However, it noted that in constant dollars, “current public investment in agricultural research and extension is below 1980s levels. Meanwhile, investments by our competitors are growing rapidly. In 2016 alone, China outspent the United States in agricultural research investment by \$3 billion.”**

The report notes data showing that every dollar invested in ag research returns \$10-\$20 in benefits, and spending on the deferred maintenance would generate 200,000 jobs.

APLU’s Board on Agricultural Assembly “calls upon Congress and the administration to provide resources to update the invaluable network of extramural research facilities via a grant program administered through the National Institute of Food and Agriculture,” Steele said.



*Thomas Coon, Oklahoma State University*

University leaders who talked to *Agri-Pulse* told similar stories. Thomas Coon, vice president, dean and director of Oklahoma State University’s Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources, was able to quickly offer examples.

**“We have a building called Agricultural Hall that was built in the 1950s, early ‘60s. And most of the laboratories are ones we can’t even use any more,” he says. “They simply don’t have the capacity to handle the electrical load, they don’t have the HVAC that we need for safe operations. A lot of the safety measures just don’t come anywhere close to what current code is like.”**

Oklahoma State has “a really strong wheat program,” he says, but because of the lab issues, those geneticists had to move to another building, Coon said. In addition, breeders are working at greenhouses built in the 1930s or ‘40s.

**“Our scientists are incredible,” Coon says. “They’ve been really productive. We’ve got 24 varieties of wheat that we have released for commercialization, and yet we’re operating in these facilities that are way outdated.”**

In both cases, the university is planning replacements. Oklahoma State will break ground next month on a \$100 million facility to replace the lab building — half the money will come from university-issued bonds and half from private donations, which now total \$43 million.

**“You can go to any of the other” land-grants and find similar situations, Coon says. North Carolina State, for example, is spending \$160 million on a new plant science building that also has required a lot of private fundraising, he said. But “you can go to Arkansas, you can go to Michigan State, you can go to Kansas State, you can even go to Cornell, and you’ll find similar situations.”**



Douglas Buhler, director of Michigan State University's AgBioResearch and assistant vice president of research and innovation, said MSU faces similar problems, with aging greenhouses and labs, as well as a dairy research facility that needs to be replaced. A new science facility would cost around \$100 million, updating the greenhouses would be about \$20 million, and a high-end dairy research center would cost in the neighborhood of \$40-\$50 million, he said.

**Michigan faces particular challenges because of the diversity of its agriculture production in the state, which also includes blueberries, cherries, apples and asparagus.**

“We like to claim to have the second most diverse agricultural economy behind California,” Buhler says, which puts pressure on the university to address a wide range of issues.

Echoing Coon’s remarks, Buhler says older facilities are simply not up to the task of handling today’s challenges, which require controlled environments.

**“We need to be able to control and simulate environments and what we predict the environment to be in the future,” Buhler said. “A lot of our older greenhouses are just basically big greenhouses that are there to grow things. They’re not equipped to simulate different conditions of light, of gas of temperature, the kinds of things that we need to understand the genetics of plant response.”**

The advent of climate change — and with it, changing weather patterns — and appearance of new invasive plant species and pests also are challenging university researchers.

In addition to global competitiveness, another issue is attracting talent, both Coon and Buhler said.

“If we're going to be able to hire and retain the best scientists, they need high-end facilities,” Buhler said.

APLU said the study was conducted by Gordian, which it characterized as "a leader in facility and construction cost data, software and expertise."

## **USDA: Upcoming livestock surveys can aid future trade talks**

The Agriculture Department is recruiting owners of cattle and hog operations to take part in surveys about their marketing strategies and the size and health of their herds, and officials say the results could be beneficial in future trade negotiations.

To assure producers of confidentiality, only the researchers will know the identity of participating farmers, and no names or contact information will be associated with the data.

**Starting in May and running through July, USDA’s National Animal Health Monitoring System, working in conjunction with the National Agricultural Statistics Service, will be conducting surveys of small enterprise swine operations, farms with fewer than 1,000 pigs.**

Researchers will collect information on the prevalence of pathogens such as E. coli as well as on management practices and alternative marketing strategies. Roughly 5,000 operations across 38 states will be asked to participate. In a second phase of the survey, for example, vets will be asking about specific diseases producers have encountered, along with vaccine and medication usage.

Charles Haley, a veterinary epidemiologist at USDA who is leading the swine study, said between 60% and 70% of operations in the country have fewer than 1,000 pigs and the number of those small farms seems to have increased slightly. He's trying to figure out why.

**“There’s been some shift into niche marketing — such as organic, pasture-raised, antibiotic-free — and we know nothing about those people. We don’t know anything about their education needs. We don’t know how they market at all,” Haley told *Agri-Pulse*.**

He said having national estimates of the entire swine population are useful in trade negotiations, too.

“I’ve never been to a trade negotiation, but I think we’re the only country in the world that can actually produce national estimates as a snapshot for a trading partner on a variety of things,” Haley noted. He said those things include production, housing, and other husbandry practices.

Data on health and management practices faced by swine producers will be compared with similar data collected in 2007 and 2012, according to USDA.

In May, certain producers will receive a letter in the mail explaining the study and will be asked to participate by filling out a questionnaire. NASS statisticians will then follow up with the producer if they don't get a response.

A study focusing on large swine operations with more than 1,000 pigs will take place from July through January 2022, and also will focus on health and management practices.

Haley expects researchers to identify impacts related to the COVID-19 pandemic. The surveys were supposed to be conducted last year but were postponed because of the pandemic.

**“We talked with the industry people and they said, ‘No you can’t visit these guys now, they’re going through hell with all the plant closures.’ I do expect to see something, and I think the industry expects to see something different, too,” he said.**



Ethan Lane, NCBA

As the industry works with trading partners, legislators, and regulators, Liz Wagstrom, chief veterinarian at National Pork Producers Council, said these types of reports are critical in negotiations.

“We have this (and) the agricultural census reports, but the NAHMS reports are one of the few that go into the depth of animal health and animal production, so they have great value,” Wagstrom told *Agri-Pulse*.

Wagstrom said throughout the almost 30-year history of the reports, there’s been a long partnership in helping with the development of the surveys and all producers are encouraged to participate.

Meanwhile, a national two-phased study starting this month will examine cattle health and feedlot management with operations having at least 50 animals, and the National Cattlemen's Beef Association is asking members to participate.

“We anticipate 5,300 feedlot operations to be randomly selected for the first phase of the study,” said Chuck Fossler, another USDA veterinary epidemiologist.

If participants choose to take part in the second phase, USDA or state veterinary health professionals will administer an additional questionnaire from June through August.

Fossler said the information collected will help to better understand disease preparedness strengths and vulnerabilities, help policymakers and industry stakeholders make informed decisions regarding feedlot cattle health and management, and identify research and development needs.

Ethan Lane, NCBA's vice president of government affairs, said the U.S. feedlots survey is relatively new compared to other studies NAHMS has done.

**"It's a great opportunity to start to build that record of data and trends over time so we can get an idea where USDA can target its efforts over time and where the industry needs to be focused on, on various trends and feedlot management," Lane told *Agri-Pulse*.**

Fossler also said they will be looking into how COVID-19 impacted the industry over the last year.

"There are several questions about whether COVID has affected management or cattle health in feedlots, such as the number of placements, average days on feed, and illnesses in late-fed cattle," he noted.

Surveyors also will be asking questions about the use of antibiotics and other medications used to treat or control bovine respiratory disease and other illnesses. There are additional questions about the use of products that may have food safety implications, Fossler said.

Fossler said previous NAHMS feedlot studies have been conducted in 1994, 1999, 2011, and 2017. He also emphasized that producer information would be kept confidential.

## **News Briefs:**

**Peach genome reveals traits for climate change adaptation.** New research on the peach genome could eventually lead to heartier peach trees able to withstand changing climate conditions while still providing a tasty fruit. Scientists from the Boyce Thompson Institute at Cornell University and the USDA Agricultural Research Service in Ithaca, New York, worked with colleagues in China to identify the genetic information that allows peach trees to grow all over China, including in high altitude, drought, and extreme cold conditions. Their findings are published this week in the journal *Genome Research*. Zhangjun Fei, a professor at BTI and Cornell, said with the information his team identified in wild peach varieties, breeders will eventually be able to take a domesticated peach cultivar that can't withstand a particular condition (cold, drought, low oxygen, etc.) but has good fruit and replace certain genes in it with genetic material that confers tolerance to the condition. The result would be a heartier variety that still has the desirable fruit. "We know there is a lot of land that can grow peach if you have new cultivars," Fei said. Genomic studies to identify climate adaptation genes have been done on crops, like rice, soybeans, and sorghum, and on pine, poplar and spruce trees, but "this is the first one in fruit trees." Fei said ultimately the goal is for breeders to use the new information to bring the heartier varieties to market. Traditional genetic engineering or the newer CRISPR technology could be deployed, or he says maybe something else will come along. "No one knows what kind of technology we will have in the near future," Fei said.

**January meat export figures lower on labor, transportation concerns.** Exports of American beef and pork were lower in the first month of 2021, a result the U.S. Meat Export Federation says is due to “COVID-related obstacles and significant transportation and labor challenges.” Year-over-year January figures for 2021 showed drops in beef and pork exports and disparate figures for lamb (export volume up 7% but export value down 43%). USMEF President and CEO Dan Halstrom characterized the month as solid despite the drops. “As key destinations for U.S. red meat roll out COVID vaccination programs, the outlook for 2021 is optimistic, with retail meat demand remaining strong and the expectation that foodservice will rebound in more and more regions,” Halstrom said. However, he pointed to transportation challenges, “particularly the congestion and container shortages at our West Coast ports where shorthanded crews are handling record-large cargo volumes.” There’s also the matter of labor stability at processing plants still working in the midst of the pandemic. “Although the global foodservice sector still has a long recovery ahead, international demand for U.S. red meat remains impressive and resilient,” he added. “But a range of logistical challenges must be overcome in order to fully satisfy this demand.” Compared to 2020 figures, January beef exports were down 2% by volume; value was down 3%. USMEF attributed the decline “mainly to lower beef variety meat shipments” and said muscle cut exports “were steady with January 2020.” Pork exports slightly exceeded USMEF expectations but still dropped 9% in volume and 13% in value. Exports to the China/Hong Kong region dropped – which USMEF noted was expected – but exports to Japan increased.

**Concern grows over problems with shipping U.S. ag exports.** Over 100 House members sent a [letter to the chair of the Federal Maritime Commission](#) Tuesday, expressing concerns about carriers declining to ship U.S. agriculture exports from U.S. ports. They called for the commission to expedite its fact finding and consideration of enforcement options, as well as provide monthly reports. “Over the past year, American producers, exporters, and entire economic sectors have grappled with widespread delays, bottlenecks, and increasing fees at our ports,” the letter notes. “These challenges are exacerbated by reports that VOCCs (vessel-operating common carriers) are delivering shipments to U.S. ports and then electing to leave without refilling empty containers with American goods for export. Such activity constricts entire supply chains and propels trade to move only in an inbound direction. These conditions are unsustainable for exporters, put significant strain on the U.S. economy, and simply unacceptable.” “These troubling reports of VOCCs refusing to ship U.S. exports at our ports must be investigated swiftly, and have consequences if misconduct is revealed,” said Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb. “This issue does not stop just at our ports on the coast, it also poses a dangerous threat all along the supply chain of perishable products that begin across the Midwest in states like Nebraska.” Rep. Jim Costa, D-Calif., said it is “critical that we resolve supply chain issues “so our producers can quickly ship healthy, nutritious food around the world. This letter sends a strong bipartisan message to quickly investigate and resolve any issues that impact our economy and ability to feed the world.” In March 2020, the Federal Maritime Commission launched Fact Finding No. 29, “International Ocean Transportation Supply Chain Engagement,” to investigate all the congestion, bottlenecks, and fees seen at our ports. In November, Fact Finding No. 29 was expanded to include reports of the decline to ship American exports.

**EPA Seeks Nominations for Local Government Advisory Committee.** The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is looking for nominees to serve on its Local Government Advisory Committee (LGAC), which advises the EPA on critical environmental issues impacting local governments. The agency is also accepting nominations for LGAC’s Small Communities Advisory Subcommittee (SCAS). “Local and state partnerships are vital to EPA’s mission of promoting and protecting public health and the environment,” said Deputy Associate Administrator for Intergovernmental Relations Casey Katims. Members of the LGAC and SCAS

will provide advice and recommendations on a broad range of issues, including: ensuring access to clean air and water; reducing greenhouse gas emissions; advancing environmental justice; bolstering resilience to the impacts of climate change; and limiting exposure to dangerous chemicals and pesticides. Candidates must be current elected or appointed officials representing local, state, tribal or territorial governments. EPA expressly values diversity, equity, and inclusion, and encourages the nominations of individuals from diverse backgrounds, so that the LGAC and SCAS look like America and reflect the country's rich diversity. To be considered for 2021 appointments, nominations should be submitted by April 16, 2021. [Learn more about the nomination process here.](#) For more information about the LGAC, [please click here.](#)

## Farm Hands West: Michael reelected to San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority Board

**Cannon Michael** has been reelected as chairman of the San Luis and Delta-Mendota Water Authority Board. Michael is a sixth generation California farmer and president of Bowles Farming Company. Michael also serves as chair of the Henry Miller Reclamation District, is a board member with the Water Education Foundation and serves as an advisory board member of the Public Policy Institute of California. Elected to serve as vice-chair is **William Bordeau**, executive vice president of farming operations for Harris Farms. He replaces former Westlands Water District Chairman **Don Peracchi**.



*Cannon Michael*

**Keith Murfield**, CEO of the United Dairymen of Arizona has announced he will retire effective April 1. UDA Board Chairman **Craig Caballero** will become the interim CEO until a successor has been named. Murfield has been the CEO of UDA for over 20 years.

**Wilson Orvis** has been hired by Friant Water Authority as its new chief financial officer. He worked for the Bureau of Reclamation for over 14 years, most recently as a deputy director in Reclamation's Denver policy office.

Wisconsin native **Kelliann Blazek** joined the Biden administration as a special assistant to the president for agriculture and rural policy. Most recently, Blazek worked in Wisconsin's Office of Rural Prosperity under Democratic Gov. **Tony**

**Evers**. To read more on Blazek's career, click [here](#).

The White House has brought on **Noah Kaufman** as a senior economist for the Council of Economic Advisers. Kaufman previously worked at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs' Center on Global Energy Policy. During the Obama administration, Kaufman was a deputy associate director of energy and climate change at the Council on Environmental Quality. He will take leave from Columbia to fill the White House role. **Jane Flegal** will also join the administration as senior director of industrial emissions at the Council on Environmental Quality. Flegal is a program officer at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, where she has worked on grant-making for climate and clean energy issues. She is taking leave from the foundation to fill the White House role.

The Department of the Treasury hired **Catherine Wolfram** as the deputy assistant secretary for climate and energy economics in the office of economic policy. Wolfram most recently served as associate dean and Cora Jane Flood professor of economics at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley. She also served as the program director of the environmental and energy economics group at the National Bureau of Economic Research.

The administration also appointed **Libby Washburn** as special assistant to the president for Native affairs. Washburn most recently served in senior leadership roles at New Mexico State University and the University of New Mexico, focusing on building compliance structures and strengthening ethics requirements and Title IX processes. She previously worked in the Obama administration at the Department of the Interior. To see a list of other appointments made by the administration, click [here](#).



*Keith Murfield*

Kalera, a vertical farming company, has added former Secretary of Agriculture **Sonny Perdue** to its board of directors. Perdue, who has also personally invested in the company, served as secretary of agriculture from 2017-2021 and was also the Georgia governor from 2003-2011.

**Greg Ibach**, former USDA undersecretary of marketing and regulatory programs, has joined the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources as the institute's inaugural undersecretary-in-residence. He will help advance the institute in agricultural biotechnology policy, agricultural biosecurity and workforce training, and help build the partnership between the National Institute of Antimicrobial Resistance Research Education and APHIS. Prior to joining USDA, the Nebraska native was the state's agriculture director.

**Richard Fordyce** has joined Osborn Barr Paramore (OBP) as business growth director. Fordyce previously served as the administrator of USDA's Farm Service Agency. At OBP, he will focus on strategic business development and will represent the agency in roles with various local, regional and national agriculture industry organizations.



*Jane Flegal*

**Steve Adair** has been selected as Ducks Unlimited's chief scientist, assuming the role as DU's leader on waterfowl and habitat science. The transition will occur following the retirement of **Tom Moorman**. Adair most recently was DU's national director of conservation strategy. He also served as the Great Plains Region director of operations in Bismarck, N.D.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman David Scott, D-Ga., has added one new staffer and promoted another on the Democratic staff of the House Agriculture Committee. New to the committee staff is **Joshua Lobert**, who will serve as

counsel. He previously worked at the Congressional Research Service, where he advised members of Congress and their staff on legal issues related to financial regulation, securities law, and national security law. **Emily German** has been promoted to subcommittee staff director for the Subcommittee on Commodity Exchanges, Energy, and Credit. German currently serves as a policy analyst for the committee.

The Plant Based Foods Association has tapped **Rachel Dreskin** to serve as its new CEO. She comes to PBFA from Compassion in World Farming, where she served as U.S. executive director. Before that, she was the head of food business for PBFA.

World Food Program USA has brought on **Scott Price**, president of UPS International, to its board of directors. He previously served as UPS's chief strategy and transformation officer.

**Chris Christensen** has been elected to a two-year term as president of the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association's board of directors. Christensen is a director of NorVal Electric Cooperative in Montana. He succeeds **Curtis Wynn**, CEO of Roanoke Electric Cooperative. **Tony Anderson**, general manager of Cherryland Electric Cooperative in Michigan, was elected vice president, and **Joe Martin**, board president at Mountain View Electric Association in Colorado, was selected to serve as secretary-treasurer.

**Best regards,**

**Sara Wyant**  
**Editor**

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