

CDFA's Sec. Ross: Keeping food safe, abundant during the pandemic

As the COVID-19 public health crisis expands across California, *Agri-Pulse* spoke with CDFA Secretary Karen Ross on the efforts her department is leading to ensure the safety and reliability of the food supply. The conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

1. How are you and your staff holding up through this?

I have the best staff in the world. I know I brag about them all the time, but we have adapted so quickly to this new way of doing business, and the staff has been terrific. We're learning a lot about business continuity.

2. In responding to the crisis, where has CDFA been focusing its efforts?

First was just getting ourselves equipped to do a very aggressive telework policy, and we implemented it very rapidly.

Then, we identified essential functions that would continue, and shared that with our industry so they would know what to expect from us, and then the types of biosecurity and additional measures that we would take to prevent any unintentional spread of the virus. That's taken quite a bit of time.



Sec. Ross spoke with *Agri-Pulse's* Brad Hooker and Sara Wyant on Zoom.

We've had way too much practice in California in recent years with doing emergency response. We're very familiar with our Emergency Operations Center. We almost immediately activated what is called Essential Services Function 11, which is food and agriculture. That's the one that we lead. We're also part of the critical infrastructure and transportation essential services functions.

There's a lot of time going into those processes, which are very important because it brings a centralized way of knowing all the different moving parts we have. We're used to responding to emergencies that are isolated areas. This is the whole state, all the time, real-time decision making.

3. How would you say agriculture in California is facing a different set of circumstances?

One is just how much product is already been planted and harvested, especially the harvested piece of that.

When you look at a sudden stop in so many activities, with regard to what we have here and we're putting into the distribution channels, slightly more over half of the food that is sold and consumed in this country on a daily basis goes into food service and restaurants. The other half goes to retail. We've got distribution channels and relationships in our fresh produce sector that have been built around servicing the food service.

All of a sudden, restaurants closed, conventions aren't being held, hotels are empty, and there's a lot of product that's been displaced. It happened very immediately. Contracts were getting cut. Truckloads were being turned back and it's in the coolers.

A big part of what we've been doing the last 10 days is working on how we can capture that food at a time where we have more people at our food banks than we've had in over a decade and make sure we can salvage whatever we can.

We're working with the industry on the proposals they're putting forward to Secretary Perdue for the CARES Act and the relief funds that will be coming from that.

Obviously, immediate repercussions to the beef sector. Of course, our dairy situation is severe. But unfortunately, that's happening across the country.

4. How are you coordinating with the private sector right now when they have roadblocks they're trying to overcome?

If they didn't have my cell number before, they do now. I'm a 24/7 kind of employee. We've been reaching out to industry, but of course they also reach out to us.

We're also really blessed in California that part of our infrastructure is our county agricultural commissioners. They operate under our statutory authority as well as the Department of Pesticide Regulation. Oftentimes, the issues first surface locally, and then they're brought to us.

The members of our State Board of Food and Agriculture are like our eyes and ears out in their local communities. We've been hosting conference calls and we have points of contact within our department, across all of our divisions, that work almost directly on a daily basis with a number of industry members. We feel like we have a good sense of what's happening out there.

5. Is the administration considering a pause on procedures for new regulations until after the emergency order is lifted, as farm groups have requested?

A number of those requests are still being evaluated. A lot of the initial response has been related to public health issues. Some of the things that were more eminent, we're trying to handle on a case-by-case basis.

As we feel like we're in a better position with our response to the public health crisis, we'll be looking at the immediate as well as the long-term planning that's necessary for recovery. You want to start planning for recovery, even when you're in the midst of what feels like will never be the end of a horrible situation.

There are a number of requests around environmental regulations or other types of new regulations. With trying to discern which ones would make potential sense for a blanket hold, as of right now, a lot of them have been put on delays for two weeks or 30 days so we can reassess the situation. It's premature to say how that will be ultimately handled.

6. How does the industry prevent food waste?

The program we started in partnership with the California Association of Food Banks a decade ago is Farm to Family. It was primarily to make sure that at those points in the season when you have excess that it could be turned into access. We've had a longstanding relationship with our food banks to take our seasonal products.

Right now, we're working with the distribution channels to see where we might be able to get some additional storage. The cold chain is always going to be an issue for that. They've got pretty good capacity.

One thing we're working on with a Food Crisis Task Force across all agencies is to identify where there might be some available assets that could be dedicated to this.

I also want to caution - none of us likes to grow our food and then have to farm it under, but turning it back into the soil is not always a bad thing when you think about the nutrients that that's adding to the soil.

What's really heartbreaking right now is to know how severely affected our dairy families have been with this dramatic drop in prices and then to start disposing of milk that's in excess right now.

7. How bad is the milk dumping in California right now?

Ours just started. We got notification because of our environmental regulations with our regional water quality control boards. The boards have to be notified and they've approved the protocol in six of our milk sheds.

We just got notification of the first dumping that occurred this past weekend. It has not been severe, but we do calculate that we have at least 10% excess milk. This just happens to be spring flush. This just happens to be prime season for that much milk. But when you take butter and all the foodservice stuff out of the equation, you can't process it all. Hopefully USDA will be able to implement those relief dollars rapidly.

8. Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Farmers, ranchers, farmworkers and what they do has never been as appreciated in such a tangible way as it is right now.

I hope when we get to the other end of this, that newfound appreciation for the people who are at the beginning of that food chain becomes evident at the restaurant table or in the preparation of a meal at home, with a new sense of understanding and appreciation by all of our consumers.

We know food is our connector. It does help us build community. In sad times and in happy times, food is what brings us together. We will get through this and we will have another day of great big family and block party celebrations around good food on the table.

It's a fencerow-to-fencerow farm fight against COVID-19

The ominous virus that is disrupting agriculture coast to coast isn't derailing American farmers' and ranchers' fight against it.

On the contrary, checks with farm and agribusiness contacts in California, Florida — states with high COVID-19 incidence and elsewhere — shows an intense fence-row-to-fence-row pushback against the novel coronavirus and the COVID-19 disease it spreads.

The virus is bringing a ton of disruption to farmers and farmworkers. Farmers are dumping surplus milk in some regions, owing in part to the closing of schools, for example, and Kristen Coady, vice president of Dairy Farmers of America, says overall demand is down about 10%, especially owing to foodservice dropoff. Meanwhile, farmworkers' kids sit home without that milk in their usual school breakfasts and lunches.

At the same time, the nationwide closure of bars and sit-down restaurants spells lemons rotting in orchards and warehouses.

So, it's a mixed bag. The strawberry harvests and markets in both California and Florida have been robust, with fully deployed workforces. “We harvest all year round, and we're about to enter our peak,” says Carolyn O'Donnell, California Strawberry Commission marketing director. Rains have supported a big harvest (not too much falling), and virus-scared shoppers loaded up on strawberries in March, she says.

“**Agriculture is absolutely disrupted**” in his state, says California Farm Bureau Federation President Jamie Johansson, “in terms of just uncertainty for those who are getting ready to harvest or those who are harvesting, in terms of making sure labor is available, in terms of ... even traveling during the shelter in place orders.”

In states with homebound orders, thousands of farmworkers are carrying temporary IDs from employers, declaring their farm work as essential in this pandemic.



Carolyn O'Donnell, California Strawberry Commission

In Hillsborough County, Fla., a major fresh produce area east of Tampa, Florida Strawberry Growers Association executive director Kenneth Parker says that although strawberry farmers there “dodged a bullet,” wrapping up harvest just as coronavirus began to choke sales, growers of tomatoes, watermelon, cantaloupes, squash, and other crops there **“are taking a beating. It’s horrible how much produce is having to be destroyed,”** he says.

Nonetheless, most farmers are making the COVID-19 fight top priority, say Parker and Johansson and a chorus of other farm leaders. “The first order of business is and has always been ... ensuring the safety and health of our families and employees ... required safety trainings, sanitation ... especially with the Food Safety Modernization Act. So that sort of training is not new,” Johansson says, **“but, in addition, what can we do? (More frequent) hand washing, staggering start times so employees aren’t all showing up at once ... social distancing” in the field as much as possible.**

Says Parker: “We are highly regulated for food safety, so there’s a lot of protocols in place. But (with COVID-19) we doubled down on efforts to ensure safety for the workers.”

Underpinning their efforts are a multitude of federal agencies, universities, farm and commodity groups and agribusinesses, all posting online COVID-19 guidance, and alerts for farm management and worker safety, such as [this checklist](#) by the Western Center for Agricultural Health and Safety at the University of California, Davis, and [this quick video guidance](#) by a University of Arkansas extension agronomist. The postings generally draw from U.S. Centers for Disease Control guidance and are often printed and have become a part of universal farm and agribusiness work environment lately.

U.S. farmers’ coronavirus pushback may be making a big difference. No California or Florida farmers and farm groups *Agri-Pulse* contacted reported knowing of COVID-19 cases among their members or workers. At least in part, that may be because farms and farmworkers are generally removed from COVID-19 hotspots.



Some California farm groups have distributed this bumper sticker as the coronavirus pandemic continues.

Still, farmworker advocates fear that COVID-19 risks are rising for workers, particularly those who must labor side by side in processing plants or produce sorting sites, and where farms might not conduct, or have enough materials for, full protective measures.

For example, on Tuesday a union representing poultry plant workers in several states declared that major packers’ response to the virus “has only been recent, sporadic and limited ... leaving most workers unprotected - despite months-long demands,” and the union charges that “workers at their plants have been dying.”

The risks are serious, especially for migrant workers, most of whom return from the field or processing plant to cramped housing conditions where they may face even greater risk of transmission, says Sylvia Partida, chief executive officer for the National Center for Farmworker Health in Buda, Texas.

Likely fewer than half of U.S. farmworkers have health insurance. Partida notes the most recent credible estimates, 2015-2016 findings by the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS), reported just 47% of farmworkers had insurance, and she doesn't expect the share has risen much since, if at all.

What's more, many of the hospitals in the rural areas where farmers and farmworkers would go are in danger of being overrun if COVID-19 erupts in rural communities.

In general, Partida expects “there is a real concern among growers to ensure the safety and health of their workers, because there won't be any workers to replace them” if COVID-19 invades their farms.

Also, fortunately, farmworkers may benefit from Congress' recent Families First Coronavirus Response Act, which mandates 80 hours of sick leave, for example, and the stimulus bill's forgivable loans for farmers who keep up their payrolls.

Partida says her staff has found farmers are adopting countless ways to keep the virus at bay: “greatly limiting visitors, using a drop box for deliveries, limiting off-farm supply pickups or meetings. It's just different for every farm depending on what's being produced and their business model.” She notes the livestock operators “already do a lot of this for biosecurity reasons.”

“So, I'd like to think, being optimistic, there'll be closer cooperation among growers and those in the communities who provide health care access, and that those partnerships will strengthen,” she says.

Manuel Cunha, who heads the Nisei Farmers League in California, reported full cooperation when he recently called managers of seven large grocery outlets in the eastern part of the San Joaquin Valley to accommodate farmworkers. Among other things, he handles farm labor contracts and monitors food safety practices for farmer members.

Cunha said farmworkers were finding empty food shelves and bins, owing to COVID-related hoarding, when they got off work Fridays and went to buy groceries for the week. He asked the managers to restock in mid-afternoon, instead of just in the mornings, so farmworkers could more quickly access groceries and minimize their exposure in the stores, something they all agreed to do.

Though farmers have long worn protective masks for some practices, such as spraying pesticides or other chemicals use, most farm groups have bowed to the emergency priority for medical and health professionals to have N95 surgical masks.

But with a recent CDC guidance reversal, now recommending people wear face coverings in public, O'Donnell says her California strawberry growers might soon order bandanas for members who want workers to wear them.

So far, labor-dependent farms seem to be getting enough workers, even though COVID outbreaks could surely deplete the U.S. farm workforce.

Parker says Florida resident farm laborer supply hasn't disappeared with COVID-19, and **“over half of workforce (for Florida strawberries) is H-2A labor, and we've been able to keep**

them in place,” with many rotating out of winter crop harvests and coming back for spring and summer crops. (The State Department recently eased procedures for approving those temporary farm worker visas.)

California Citrus Mutual President Casey Creamer says, “just about everything is being harvested right now,” including grapefruit, lemons, and mandarins, and naval orange harvest is still going.

“We have not seen the impact (of COVID-19) on harvesting labor at this point,” Creamer says. “We haven’t seen a dramatic drop-off in our (citrus) harvesting capabilities at this point,” though many of commodity growers **“are now just about to start harvesting and trying to get H-2A crews into their system.”**

Mike Testa, who owns and manages a bevy of wine grape vineyards in Santa Barbara County, Calif., says it helps that many grape growers were already reducing acreage this year because of surplus. “Pretty much everybody I know is (tending vineyards) with less labor,” he says.



Marshall Miller, Miller Family Wine Company

“The biggest liability is in (loss of) the workforce; keeping them safe, keeping them healthy, making sure nobody’s reporting to work with symptoms of being sick ... (and) we are having a portion of our workforce choosing to stay home. We don’t want to ask people to work who feel they are in high risk,” he says.

It’s also been important to “allow workers extra time to wash hands. We’re making sure we are doing everything we can ... keeping crews small and keeping people safe and distanced while they’re working.”

It’s now the season for grape vine planting, Testa says, “which is normally done in sync, with people following right behind each other to complete tasks.” **Instead, field crews are staggered this spring, “entering into different blocks at different times so everyone is at least six feet apart,”** he says. Also, “fortunately, the majority of the (spring) work, is tractor work, which is, by design, independent work ... mowing, disking,” he says.

Like Testa and others, Marshall Miller, who heads operations for the Miller Family Wine Company in the Paso Robles, Calif., area, is adapting personnel and hours to fight COVID-19. “We are definitely down in terms of staff, but we take seriously making accommodations” for anyone at high risk because of age or health vulnerabilities, he says, and juggling days and hours for “single parents or parents where the other spouse can’t take off work and kids are school-aged and at home.” Day care centers are also closed, he points out.

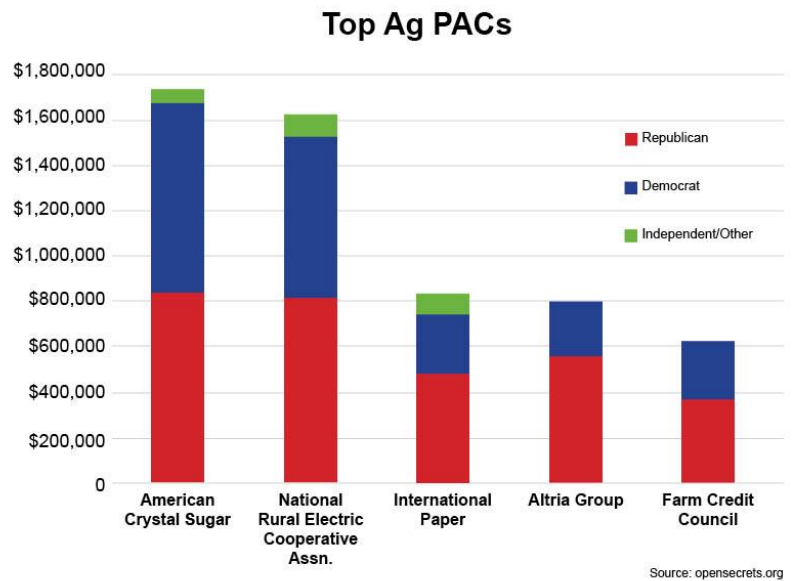
Miller scrutinized his employees’ car pools, too, “so if they’re carpooling together, they’re working together ... to keep workers in as small an exposure group as possible.”

“Everybody is reasonably and understandably scared at this moment,” Miller says, “but our goal as a company is to make sure the workplace doesn’t mean extra fear” for the workers.

PAC money slowed, but not stopped, during COVID-19

Years of a sluggish farm economy and an unfolding global pandemic have not slowed ag and rural stakeholder dollars from flowing to political candidates seeking federal office in the 2020 election.

A little over \$20 million has been given to candidates by food, ag, and rural political action committees so far this year, according to data compiled by the Center for Responsive Politics and analyzed by *Agri-Pulse*. While Republicans are still collecting the lion's share of funds (about 58%), Democrats are receiving a larger percentage of contributions (around 37%) than what was observed in previous *Agri-Pulse* PAC reports. At various parts of [2017](#), [2018](#), and [2019](#), those reports showed Democratic candidates and causes receiving between 27-31% of the total ag and rural campaign contributions.



This time around, a new wave of Democratic lawmakers elected in the 2018 midterms has put a number of lobbyists in an educational role to bring new members up to speed.

Kevin Price is the vice president of government affairs for American Crystal Sugar, which has consistently been the top PAC in agriculture and one of the top PACs in politics. He tells *Agri-Pulse* the influx of fresh faces on Capitol Hill impacted their strategy for the last two years.

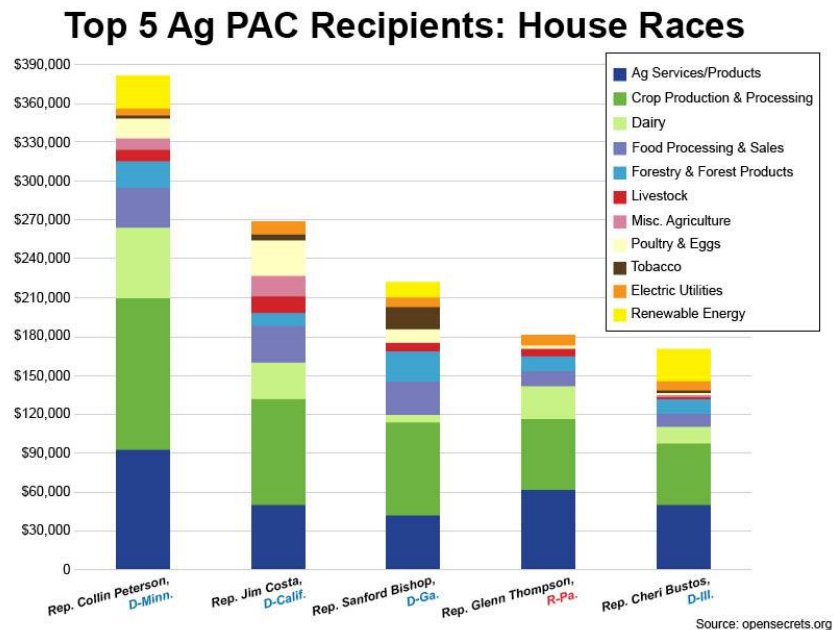
“We made a concerted effort to get to know a lot of new members,” he said. “There are lots of great new relationships that we’ve built — and look forward to building more — while also valuing the longtime friends that we have in Congress.”

But that need for education brings with it a challenge for lobbyists: not running afoul of federal election laws. While the image of a fat-cat lobbyist wandering the halls of Congress handing out \$100 bills to anyone with Representative or Senator before their name might make for a good political cartoon, both members and lobbyists alike are mindful of what kinds of conversations can happen, and where.

“You go to Capitol Hill to talk about issues, you go to fundraisers to talk about campaign-related activities, and the two shall not cross,” a D.C.-based lobbyist told *Agri-Pulse*. “The worlds are kept very separate, and for good reason.”

Here's a breakdown of this year's ag, food, and rural PAC contributions (figures are as of March 23):

- House Ag Committee Chair Collin Peterson, D-Minn., received the most money of any one candidate (\$381,000) in his effort to secure a 16th term in Congress; Iowa Republican Joni Ernst, seeking a second term in the Senate, received the largest amount (\$176,949) of anyone in the Senate.



- If PAC money is any indication, agriculture has a clear favorite in the Senate seat being vacated by the retirement of Senate Ag Committee Chair Pat Roberts. Roger Marshall, a two-term House Republican, brought in \$167,500. Only one other Senate candidate from that Kansas race, fellow Republican Susan Wagle, received any money at all as she collected \$1,000.
- Vulnerable Senate Republicans up for reelection were major recipients of PAC money. Sens. Cory Gardner, R-Colo., and Thom Tillis, R-N.C., both landed in the Senate's top five despite neither serving on the chamber's ag committee (Tillis previously served on the panel.)
- House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California received the most money (\$128,000) of any of the "four corners" of House and Senate leadership. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was next highest at \$103,900, followed by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi at \$66,000 and Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer at \$11,500. Of those four, Schumer is the only one not facing reelection this year.

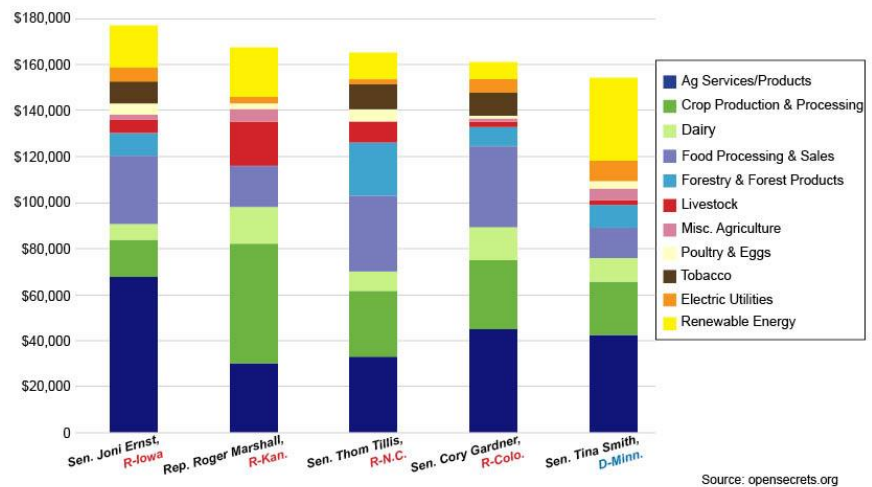
There's also the matter of the lingering coronavirus pandemic and its impact on the political process. Congress is out of town, fundraisers have ground to a halt, and some of the same lobbyists that would be interacting with an organization's PAC spending are now focused on things like implementation of the \$2 trillion recovery package.

“On a national level, there's far more discussion and engagement on dealing with the epidemic, dealing with the crisis that we face, than there is talking politics and talking campaigns,” Louis Finkel, senior vice president for government relations for the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, said. “The politics of this are taking a back seat to dealing with the substance and the policies that are going to carry us through.”

But for those running for office, campaigning can't wait. Some primaries have been rescheduled, but the race to win the hearts and minds of voters is ongoing, as is the clock ticking down to Election Day in just a little under seven months.

Marshall tells *Agri-Pulse* he has "not done any active campaigning" for the Kansas Senate seat he's vying for since President Donald Trump issued his social distancing guidelines in mid-March. Trump, who became known in 2016 for hosting impassioned rallies full of ardent supporters, has not had a campaign event since March 2.

Top 5 Ag PAC Recipients: Senate Races



Source: opensecrets.org

“I think everybody’s just getting accustomed and adjusting to the restrictions in place for work-related events and figuring out what the proper strategy will be going forward,” Price said. “I think everybody is in the same boat and adjusting accordingly.”

To see a complete spreadsheet of ag, food, and rural PAC giving, [click here](#).

China’s ag imports hit coronavirus barriers

China has been making strides in living up to the promises it made in the “phase one” trade deal that went into effect February, but imports of U.S. ag commodities are still far below the levels many were hoping for, and the outlook is bleak as many tariffs remain in place and the coronavirus spreads.

Chinese imports of corn and wheat spiked recently and the country even boosted imports of old crop soybeans as Brazil dealt with weather and transportation issues, but hoped-for purchases of ethanol and distillers grains seem less likely while the pandemic continues.

“In order for us to see significant sales, the U.S. needs to be able to make those sales and we need the Chinese to be able to purchase them,” said American Farm Bureau Federation Economist Veronica Nigh. “It’s very basic stuff, but with the coronavirus hitting both economies at nearly the same time, they both are being hampered significantly from being able to move the amount of product that we’re looking at.”

When the “phase one” deal was sealed, ethanol and DDGs were seen as holding great potential for boosting the U.S. ag trade surplus and helping China reach the promised \$36.5 billion in purchases in the 2020 calendar year.

The U.S. exported about \$1.6 billion worth of DDGs to China in 2015, before American exporters were hit with anti-dumping and countervailing duties. Hopes were high some of that trade could resume flowing as a result of “phase one.”

Chinese imports of U.S. DDGs “was a requirement in the purchases agreed upon in the ‘phase one’ deal,” U.S. Grains Council President and CEO Ryan LeGrand said last week. “It was key in those negotiations and we expect to see exemptions in duties that have been levied on our distillers grains.”

Industry officials also hoped to see China lift the 70% punitive tariffs on U.S. ethanol, allowing trade worth as much as \$1.5 billion.

But now U.S. ethanol plants are going offline, unable to compete as gasoline prices sink in a world economy that is consuming less and less.

“If you look back, historically, ethanol is consistently priced below that of gasoline, priced below aromatics, below MTBE, which is an oxygenate still used outside of the United States,” said LeGrand. “That relationship has reversed recently and we’re seeing cheap, cheap gasoline prices and it’s making it pretty difficult for ethanol to compete.”

POET just announced Tuesday that it will “idle production” at two plants in Iowa and one in South Dakota, as well as postpone the opening of a new plant in Indiana.

“Biofuel producers and our farm partners are confronting an economic crisis beyond anything rural America has seen before,” said Growth Energy CEO Emily Skor. “Fuel demand has cratered, foreign nations have flooded the market with crude oil, and U.S. ethanol producers are bleeding cash after one of the toughest years in memory.”

And with ethanol production declining, it’s going to be much harder to export DDGs to China, even if the country took down its steep tariffs.



Ryan LeGrand, U.S. Grains Council

China, U.S. government and industry sources tell *Agri-Pulse*, was expected to buy both ethanol and DDGs in big quantities. China even laid the foundation for making large purchases of DDGs by announcing that it had approved U.S. companies to ship the popular animal feed. Last month, China’s General Administration of Customs published a list of 88 ethanol producers that could begin shipping DDGs.

Even if China did exempt importers from anti-dumping and countervailing duties that run as high as 96%, prices for the feed are rising in the U.S. and there might not be enough to ship to China, which not so long ago was the number-one foreign market, said Nigh.

“With (billions of gallons) of ethanol being sidelined and not being produced, that’s a lot of DDGs that aren’t being produced,” the Farm Bureau economist said. “There’s a lot of demand for those DDGs, both domestically and internationally, which would

push the price of those distillers grains up. There's going to be a lot of competition for those available DDGs. Lack of supply is going to cause some headwinds."

So far U.S. exports to China in fiscal year 2020 (which runs through September) are lagging sharply behind USDA predictions, according to Farm Bureau Federation Chief Economist John Newton. While the forecast is for a meager \$14.5 billion, U.S. ag exports are only about halfway there, at about \$7.2 billion through February, he said. "Our current pace would put us between (\$10 billion and \$11 billion), which is well below USDA's \$14.5 billion. It needs to start to accelerate."

Of course, trade levels are not set for the rest of 2020 and the fourth quarter is historically a major time of the year for purchases. China has already signaled it will be buying a lot of U.S. soybeans. Furthermore, China is ramping up its chicken imports and laying the groundwork for drastically increasing the amount of U.S. beef it buys.

A little more than two weeks ago, USDA listed hundreds of new beef packers and storage facilities that are now eligible to export to China. And now trade is expected to grow soon, thanks to the country's decision to lift its ban on beef from cattle treated with growth hormones as well as accept beef from cattle older than 30 months at slaughter.

Government sources say U.S. beef exports to China are ticking up already this year (the total was only about \$60 million last year), but the new lowering of restrictions has not yet been finalized. USDA estimates that U.S. beef and beef product exports to China could reach \$1 billion annually thanks to the China pact, but the U.S. Meat Export Federation estimated it could be double that in 2020.

But those estimates were made before the coronavirus pandemic.

"At some point we will have lots of product to be able to sell, but in this scary interim period, there's some very real, practical constraints that are getting in the way of any potential demand expansion in the Chinese market," Nigh said. "I'm glad that USDA and USTR are following up on implementation of the promises in the (phase one) agreement to get all of the new rules put into place while we're dealing with the disruptions from this virus, so that when the disruptions are over, trade can come roaring back."

Food banks seek more help to meet growing demand

Food banks are adapting to doing business amid the COVID-19 pandemic in order to get food where it's needed, but are also warning lawmakers and government agencies that they will require much more help in the days and weeks ahead.

Feeding America, the nation's largest hunger-relief organization with 200 member food banks, told House and Senate leaders in a letter Tuesday that \$600 million allocated in coronavirus aid bills for food purchases and \$250 million for distribution will not be enough. The group is calling for an additional \$500 million for food purchases and \$500 million for distribution and storage.

"We remain concerned about our ability to identify enough resources to offset the increased food needs and distribution challenges, despite the incredible generosity of individuals and

companies,” Kate Leone, the group’s chief government relations officer, said in the letter, which also calls for an expansion of eligibility and increased benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Based on a survey at the end of March, Feeding America estimates costs will increase 30% over the next six months and could result in a jump of 17 million people, or 46%, experiencing food insecurity.

Food banks told Feeding America that they were seeing an average 60% increase in need for food assistance, and Carrie Calvert, the organization’s Managing Director of Government Relations, says the number of food banks “reporting they urgently need food” is only expected to increase. One in five food banks told Feeding America they’re worried about running out of food in the next two to four weeks, and 45 percent said they will distribute all their food under USDA’s Emergency Food Assistance Program in the next four weeks.

The food banks, Leone said, “are struggling to find shelf stable food to purchase for immediate food distribution as the supply chain adjusts” and less food is available from groceries and other retail outlets.

USDA says half the \$600 million allocated in two congressional aid bills has made its way to the states, and the department is working quickly to allocate the rest.

In many cases, food banks report holdups in getting food to people because they normally have to collect employment and income information to determine eligibility. Other problems include a shortage of volunteers and the need for more deliveries to people who can’t make it to the facility because they’re in quarantine or have a disability.

“In areas where there is significant economic impact and you have people waiting five hours in line for a food distribution, we can’t sign new people up to receive food through [USDA’s Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP)] fast enough, even if we are utilizing no contact methods such as pre-registering with a volunteer over the phone,” Calvert says.



Marilyn Tomasi

Marilyn Tomasi, spokesperson for the Mid-Ohio Food Collective, which distributes food to 650 food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, after-school programs, and senior housing sites across central and eastern Ohio, says her group had been allowing customers “to self-declare that they are in need of food,” but on Tuesday the state received permission from USDA for a Disaster Household Distribution Program that should streamline delivery.

USDA has given seven states and seven tribes permission to operate the disaster programs.

“Income and residency verification is not required for disaster household distributions, which are temporary in nature, and targeted to those areas with high need and food supply disruptions,” a spokesperson for USDA’s Food and Nutrition Service said.

Lisa Hamler-Fugitt, executive director of the Ohio Association of Foodbanks, said in a press release that it took “weeks of bureaucratic haggling and red tape” for the Ohio National Guard and Ohio Military Reserve, who have been helping to distribute food, to get permission to run the program.

Tomasi says Gov. Mike DeWine’s decision to deploy 100 National Guard personnel has helped in preparation, packing of, and delivery and distribution of food, meals and groceries.

Paul Donnelly, spokesman for the Food Bank of Larimer County, Colorado, says their biggest challenge right now is switching over from letting clients choose the foods they want at food pantries, to prepackaging food.

“We have had to completely reconfigure how we get food out to clients,” he said. “The drive-up model is working from a social distancing perspective, but the staff and volunteer time needed to prepackage food has been a major challenge,” forcing the food bank to reduce distribution days and hours.

In addition, “Although we are not set up for home deliveries, we are working with staff and volunteers to do weekly home deliveries for those seniors and other immune-compromised Individuals who cannot or do not feel safe leaving their home for food,” Donnelly said.

“As with all COVID-19 processes, we are learning all the time and our processes are improving,” he said.

The lines of people seeking emergency food are indicative of the demand, but Tomasi says there’s still a stigma to asking for help.

“Given the lay-offs in the hospitality industry, we are seeing many people in our community coming to the food pantry for the first time,” she says. **“We are emphasizing that there is no judgement, no shame in getting help, especially when they are left with no income.”**

In South Florida, where millions of pounds of fresh produce are being plowed under, growers have had some success in selling directly to customers on their farms, and Feeding Florida, the state’s network of food banks, has been trying to secure funding to reimburse growers for the cost of workers to harvest and pack the crops to get them to food banks, Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association spokesperson Lisa Lochridge said. The problem, she said, is that retail demand has fallen off and the foodservice market has dried up.

“It’s my understanding that the food banks in South Florida can’t take any more produce, although they are struggling to get it distributed for a whole host of reasons, including a drop in volunteers,” she said. “There is still product to be consumed. We just have to get it out into the supply chain ... but time is of the essence.”

Feeding America's Calvert confirmed that although food banks are still distributing produce that can be donated in household size packaging, a combination of agency closures, fewer volunteers, and the need for additional refrigeration capacity is making it hard to take additional bulk size produce donations. The group is backing efforts by the American Farm Bureau Federation and other commodity groups to support USDA purchases of consumer-ready produce for donation to food banks.

News Briefs

Western Growers launches new site to address changes in Leafy Greens Food Safety Guidelines. More than ever before, consumers are concerned about their health and the safety of the food they eat. To address some of those concerns, Western Growers (WG) has developed a website to facilitate changes to the Leafy Greens Marketing Agreement (LGMA)-approved Leafy Green Food Safety Guidelines: www.leafygreenguidance.com. The interactive website now easily allows the public to participate in routine discussions and process amendments that will ensure continuous improvement of the leafy green food safety preventive practices, noted Western Growers in a release.

“As an industry leader in produce safety, Western Growers remains committed to driving the evolution of guidance for preventive food safety programs in leafy greens as well as other commodities,” said Sonia Salas, WG’s assistant vice president of food safety, science & technology. “In a time where COVID-19 is top of mind for all industries, Western Growers is committed to ensuring that the important work of improving food safety continues with broad agricultural industry engagement and complete transparency among leafy green growers. This website will ensure access to that process.”

Since its first publication, the Leafy Green Guidelines have been updated many times as new research has become available and practices have evolved. This website provides an avenue to systemically amend these best practices and allows users to easily submit comments. A new comment period opens in April 2020. In addition to simplifying the Leafy Green Food Safety Guidelines amendment process, the website also offers the following:

- *Master Calendar*: calendar that outlines the comment period and deadlines for issues related to agricultural water, field sanitation, soil amendments and concentrated animal feeding operations; entire amendment process at a glance
- *LGMA Final Document*: commodity-specific food safety guidelines for the production and harvest of lettuce and leafy greens
- *Leafy Green Info Sheet*: document explaining how the Leafy Green Food Safety Guidelines amendment process works and the importance of continual incorporation of new science and information

NRCS Seeks Proposals for On-Farm Conservation Test Projects. The USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is accepting proposals through May 11 for On-Farm Conservation Innovation Trials, part of the agency’s Conservation Innovation Grant (CIG) program. Now in its second year, the trials help support the adoption and evaluation of innovative conservation approaches on agricultural land.

“Last year California was very pleased that East Stanislaus Resource Conservation District was among the first groups in the Nation to successfully apply for one of these innovative new trials,” says Carlos Suarez, State Conservationist for NRCS in California. “We hope more RCDs and other eligible groups will apply this year with ideas to help move California forward in cutting-edge conservation.”

“What is great about these demonstrations is that they add research elements to the program design that complement the technical and financial incentives,” said Trina Walley, ESRC district manager. “The trials include data and economic analyses that farmers really appreciate,

she added. Leaders in the soil health arena since 2015, ESRCDC received \$1.57 million last year to conduct soil health demonstration trials for orchard management systems in the Central Valley.

NRCS will invest up to \$25 million on On-Farm Trials in 2020. This total includes up to \$10 million for the Soil Health Demonstration Trials (SHD) priority.

The agency will accept proposals from: Private entities whose primary business is related to agriculture; Non-government organizations with experience working with agricultural producers; and Non-Federal government agencies.

For more information, please visit the grants.gov funding opportunity for 2020 or visit [NRCS's On-Farm Trials webpage](#).

FDA, USDA need to reach agreement on animal biotech, BIO says. The COVID-19 pandemic highlights the need for an overhaul of the government's regulatory system for animal biotechnology products, the Biotechnology Innovation Organization said in a letter to President Donald Trump Tuesday. The Food and Drug Administration's "current approach to regulating all applications of this technology as a 'new animal drug' should be replaced with a new model that more appropriately draws upon existing legal authorities to safeguard animal health, food safety, and the environment," BIO President and CEO Jim Greenwood said. BIO called on USDA and FDA to sign a Memorandum of Understanding within 30 days, a move endorsed by Ag Secretary Sonny Perdue in February. Animal biotech researchers have been critical of FDA's approach, saying it is cumbersome and hinders the development of new technology. In its one-page letter, BIO said "COVID-19 highlights the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. While it would not have prevented the current pandemic, animal biotechnology holds enormous potential to safeguard society from future zoonotic diseases that frequently exact high economic and health costs, and to develop human therapeutics relevant to the current outbreak." Zoonotic diseases are those that jump from animals to humans, as is suspected in the case of the novel coronavirus. In an opinion piece posted on the *Agri-Pulse* website Tuesday, BIO Executive Vice President for Food and Agriculture Dana O'Brien said, "As the climate changes and populations grow and move, these zoonotic diseases will become more prevalent and potentially more dangerous."

Farm Hands West: Murphy joins Fall Creek Farm & Nursery board

Fall Creek Farm & Nursery Inc., based in Lowell, Ore., has added **Kevin Murphy** to its professional board of directors. Most recently, Murphy served as CEO of Driscoll's. Before that, Murphy held leadership positions at Capurro Farms, Fresh Express Farms and TransFRESH Corporation. Fall Creek Farm & Nursery is a global blueberry breeding and nursery company.

Effective April 1, **Bret McNabb** has been appointed to director of the Large Animal Clinic at the UC Davis Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital (VMTH), for a five-year term. McNabb is an assistant professor of clinical livestock reproduction in the School of Veterinary Medicine's Department of Population Health and Reproduction. He has also been service chief of VMTH's Livestock Herd Health and Reproduction Service since 2013.

Theresa Kiehn has been promoted to acting president and CEO of AgSafe, an organization that provides agriculture businesses with education on worker safety, food safety, pesticide safety and

human resources. Kiehn succeeds **Amy Wolfe**, who has been at AgSafe for more than 10 years. Kiehn joined AgSafe in 2009, and most recently was vice president and chief operating officer. Before that, Kiehn worked at the non-profit Great Valley Center, on issues including sustainability, conservation easements and protection projects in the Central Valley.

House Ag Committee Chairman **Collin Peterson** has hired **Chu-Yuan Hwang** as a senior counsel to the Committee. Hwang previously worked as an attorney for the Office of the General Counsel at USDA, touching on issues related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and other domestic nutrition assistance programs. Before joining USDA, Hwang worked as an associate for a law firm in Washington, D.C., practicing labor and employment law.

Ben Famous has joined the Glover Park Group as the new vice president of strategic communications. Famous most recently worked as the head of strategic communications for food and restaurant group CAVA and previously worked as the communications director for the Senate Ag Committee.



Ben Famous

Farm Foundation hired **Martha King** as the new vice president of programs and projects. King co-owns Finbery Inc., a family farm located in Illinois. King has worked in academia at St. Louis University, Loyola University, and currently serves as the assistant dean and executive director for the biological sciences division in the office of academic affairs at the University of Chicago.

Petya Sechanova has been tapped to lead Covantis as the company's new CEO. Sechanova most recently served as the trade operations leader for Cargill, a company she has been with for the past 11 years.

Greg Adams will cover the foreign affairs portfolio for Rep. **Barbara Lee**, D-Calif., as her new legislative director. Adams previously worked for integrated development group Locus as managing director.

Mitchel Hochberg now works for Sen. **Kirsten Gillibrand**, D-N.Y., as a legislative assistant covering the small business and international affairs portfolio. Hochberg previously worked for Rep. **Jackie Speier**, D-Calif.

Heidi Todacheene now works as a legislative counsel to Rep. **Deb Haaland**, D-N.M. She covers agriculture and food, animal welfare, and small business issues.

Annie Orloff has been elevated to deputy communications director for Sen. Tom Udall, D-N.M. She previously was working in the role of press secretary.

Past president and CEO of the U.S. Grains Council, **Darwin Stolte**, passed away at the age of 86. Stolte served as USGC president and CEO from 1970 to 1989. Stolte was a graduate of the University of South Dakota and after graduation served in the United States Army. He started with the Grains Council in 1966 as the livestock development specialist for Europe, based in Rome. During his career, Stolte participated in discussions on agricultural trade with the Soviet Union and was a key figure in the opening of agricultural relations with China in 1979.



Darwin Stolte

The Water Education Foundation's second president and influential leader of California water projects, **William Gianelli**, passed away on March 30. He was 101. Gianelli was president of the Foundation from 1985-1989. Gianelli graduated with a civil engineering degree from the University of California, Berkeley and shortly after served in WWII.

After the war, he worked in California's State Engineer's office and later in California's Department of Water Resources. He left state service for the private sector in 1960, launching what is today's MBK Engineers. He returned to the Department of Water Resources in 1967 when Gov. **Ronald Reagan** tapped him to become director. In 1981, President Ronald Reagan tapped him to become assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works, a post he held until 1984.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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