

When blazes sapped firefighters, farmers took over. Now they want state help to do more

As hundreds of wildfires threatened rural communities for months on end, firefighters grew exhausted, resources stretched thin and the rescue system became fractured. That's when farmers stepped in as firefighters.

Farmers and ranchers shared these experiences in a hearing last Wednesday for the Assembly Agriculture Committee. They stayed behind to protect livestock, create fire breaks, fill water tanks for fire engines and even scout for brush fires. They wanted the state to recognize these efforts and ease some standards to allow for training and certifications for these skills, so they can stay behind for the next fire season.

“We can sit here and talk about how we burned four million acres,” said California Farm Bureau Federation President Jamie Johansson. “But there's another six million still out there that are considered extreme high risk.”

Johansson stayed behind during an evacuation order to protect his farm from the North Complex Fire in Butte County in September.

“These wildfires are no longer destroying just homes and devastating communities,” he said. “California's farms, ranches, employee housing, equipment and raw commodities have been damaged or completely destroyed.”



By mid-November, California wildfires have burned over 4.1 million acres in 2020, compared a 5-year average of 878,800 acres, according to CALFIRE.

The 2018 Camp Fire, which also raged near Johansson's farm, destroyed 40,000 acres of rangeland, according to a report for the committee. Johansson said the cost of crop losses due to smoke and ash from the LNU Lightning Complex this year will scale into hundreds of millions. The SCU Lightning Complex fire, which burned nearly 400,000 acres in an area that is primarily rangeland, reached an estimated \$68 million in costs, according to an initial "conservative" assessment by UC researchers. Direct agricultural economic losses from the Thomas Fire of 2017 totaled about \$70 million, with an additional \$100 million in losses to farm dwellings,



Rancher and Chico State researcher David Daley

according to the Ventura County agricultural commissioner.

“These fires this year were so catastrophic and burned so hot and fast, it burned farmland that normally you wouldn't see in a wildfire zone,” said Johansson, adding that more is still to come. “California is playing catchup to a situation that has been worsening for decades and has been exasperated by drought, disease and even climate change.”

Dave Daley, a cattle producer in Butte County and professor emeritus at Chico State, said the fire situation calls for immediate action.

**“I'm really not here worried about why,” he said.
“Let's do something.”**

In the last 30 years, Daley has seen about 15 fires on his properties, but none as destructive as the North Complex Fire. He lost 400 cows and calves and large swaths of land in just 12 hours. He found one cow still alive but with her legs burned off and a calf still kicking inside.

Organic farmer Cole Mazariegos-Anastassiou fought the TCU Lightning Complex Fire in San Mateo County for three days.

“There were not enough CalFire resources to be dedicated to a rural community like ours,” he said. “Folks in our community were also incredibly necessary in saving our own farms and ranches.”

Though they were under an evacuation order, Mazariegos-Anastassiou and his neighbors stayed and went to work, showing the fire department where the fire was going, supplying fire crews with water, and digging fire breaks and pulling trees with their tractors.

“Due to those efforts, we were able to save our farm and also a lot of other farmers in our community,” he said.

But they could not return through the police roadblocks if they left for supplies. One farmer dealing with a burst pipe was not allowed to have a repairman pass vital equipment across the roadblock, which hampered his ability to defend a barn against the fire, according to Mazariegos-Anastassiou. He said farmers need to be part of the solution, in both fighting the fire and restoring the lands destroyed by fires afterward.

Johansson said the state can recognize these efforts through a standard eight-hour certification process. CalFire and the U.S. Forest Service already run a fireline safety awareness course for contracted vendors to operate dozers, water tenders, chainsaws and buses, he explained.

UC livestock advisor and sheep rancher Dan Macon told the committee that agriculture could play more of a role in targeted grazing to reduce fuel loads. He said this maintains fuel breaks and can be a cost-effective option in steep terrain and remote areas. The regulatory hurdle, he explained, is the state's ag overtime law, passed in 2016 with Assembly Bill 1066.

"Many of the contracts, particularly in more of the urban areas, do require somebody onsite 24/7," he said.



UC Livestock and Natural Resources Advisor Dan Macon

The issue, he said, may need a simple administrative fix, rather than a legislative proposal. Macon pointed to exemptions allowed under a federal program for sheep and goat herders who graze for wildfire prevention and said California could simply align its policy with the federal approach.

Adding to Macon's argument for more grazing, Kirk Wilbur, who directs government affairs for the California Cattlemen's Association, said the lawmakers could expand grazing on state lands, beyond the work performed today at state parks and on lands under the Department of Fish and Wildlife. He added that ranchers could help in prescribed fire efforts as well, if the state would ease the liability standard for the practice and exempt environmental

reviews, while air districts could allow for more burn days.

Kara Heckert, the California regional director for American Farmland Trust, went further, arguing that agriculture plays a vital role in mitigating the climate impacts that lead to the more intense and catastrophic wildfires.

"Protecting farm and ranch land is likely to have the single greatest impact in stabilizing and reducing future emissions across multiple land uses," she said. "Cutting farmland loss by 75% by 2050 would reduce our greenhouse gas emissions the equivalent of taking 1.9 million cars off the road each year."

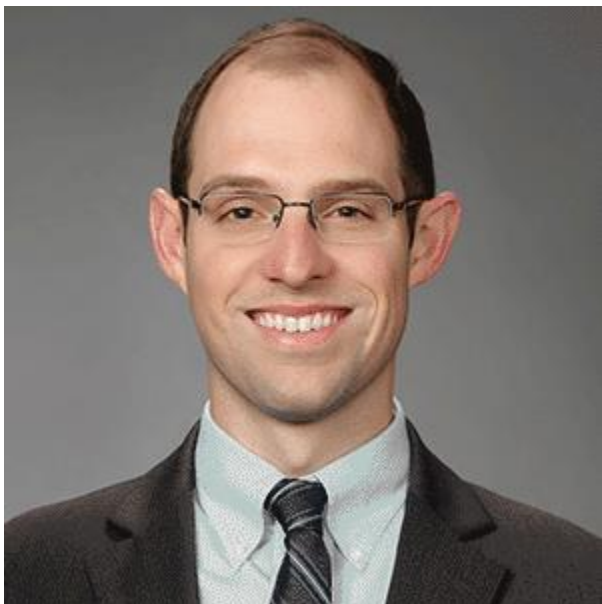
Assemblymember Robert Rivas of Salinas, who organized the hearing, [told *Agri-Pulse*](#) the impacts of wildfires on the industry will remain a key focus under his tenure as the new Ag Committee chair.

“The Legislature is obviously going to need to do a lot more with a lot less, when it comes to the resources that we’re going to have,” he said during the hearing. “But I believe that we could do it so long as we have experts, researchers, farmers and farmworkers that are all going to be part of this discussion. Tackling this issue is not going to be easy.”

New Cal/OSHA rule will undo COVID-19 safety efforts, argue farm groups

Agricultural groups worry a new COVID-19 regulation passed last Thursday sets unrealistic mandates for protecting farmworkers in employer-provided housing and transportation.

During a full-day hearing, a number of business and trade groups testified that protocols established throughout the year—by businesses, counties and state agencies—were ignored in the workplace safety standard. The Division of Occupational Safety and Health of California (Cal/OSHA) board, acknowledging the emergency regulation still has many flaws to be addressed over the coming months, passed the measure unanimously.



CalChamber policy advocate Robert Moutrie

“This is an emergency regulation that will apply incredibly broadly to almost every employer in the state,” said Rob Moutrie, a policy advocate for the California Chamber of Commerce, which led the business coalition opposing the measure.

The regulation’s narrow definition of an outbreak, he argued, would place many large employers in perpetual outbreak status, since social spread will reintroduce infections among employees, especially following Thanksgiving gatherings. Cal/OSHA defines an outbreak as three or more cases in a workplace within a two-week period.

The Western Growers Association and many others argued the standard was unnecessary and overly broad and that the process was rushed and lacked transparency. The 21-page final draft of the regulation along with a 57-page accompanying document were made public just five days before board approval. Claiming a lack of due process, the Western Agricultural Processors Association is considering legal action.

Much of the regulation codifies Cal/OSHA guidance already in place, such as requiring masks and social distancing, and adds new spacing standards of six feet apart for beds in employer-provided housing and three feet apart for workers being transported to job sites. Employers are also required to investigate cases in the workplace, provide free testing and continue pay and benefits while employees take leave for two weeks or more due to an exposure.

“It makes no sense to make employers responsible and the public safety net for COVID-19, which is exactly what this regulation does,” said Michael Miiller, director of government relations for the California Association of Winegrape Growers.

Miiller argued this, along with the rushed process, will lead to harmful unintended consequences that inhibit existing initiatives. He pointed to the governor’s Housing for the Harvest program as an example, saying the isolation housing offered would not comply with the regulation’s strict requirements for separate cooking facilities.

“No employer would ever refer an employee to housing for the harvest under this regulation,” he said.

Among his many points, Miiller argued that the issues the regulation targets have already been addressed through existing guidelines.

“When considering a burdensome regulation like this, eight months after the declaration of a pandemic, that begs the question of what took so long. Why didn't the state act earlier?” he said. “We all know the answer: The state did indeed act.”

He pointed to several executive orders issued by Gov. Gavin Newsom, guidance documents from Cal/OSHA and the Public Health Department and “stringent” city and county guidelines.

Farmers are already struggling to understand and implement requirements for recent legislative mandates as well, according to Bryan Little, the employment policy director with the California Farm Bureau Federation. The Cal/OSHA board’s emergency ruling is effective Nov. 29.

“With this truncated process, there's nobody—not the employer stakeholders, not employee stakeholders, nor the agency—that's going to be charged with trying to enforce this,” he said. “We're going to spend the next several months trying to fix what's in the draft.”

The industry is in the midst of implementing new practices related to several bills signed into law by the governor in October. Assembly Bill 685 requires ag employers to notify all employees, along with state agencies and labor unions, of a COVID-19 infection within 48 hours of an outbreak. AB 1867 expands paid sick leave benefits for food sector workers. And SB 1159 places the burden on employers for proving that infections took place off the jobsite when an employee is infected and claims workers' compensation.

In a hearing last week for the Assembly Labor and Employment Committee, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office reported that Cal/OSHA has issued more than \$1 million in citations to frontline industries since the pandemic spread to California in March. Food processing accounted for nearly half that amount, followed by healthcare, grocery stores, prisons and then agriculture, at \$38,000.



Michael Miiller, California Association of Winegrape Growers.

In making a case for the COVID-19 regulation, Cal/OSHA cited more than 7,000 new complaints about workplace safety it has received since February, leading to more than 500 inspections. It specifically targets clusters and outbreaks at food manufacturing facilities and agricultural operations, claiming an “overrepresentation of migrant temporary farmworkers testing positive” for the virus.

Several advocates for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation argued Cal/OSHA could be doing much more to protect the disproportionately impacted H-2A guestworkers, especially on the Central Coast. Labor groups, which have long called for increased state funding to support more Cal/OSHA inspectors, lauded California and the new regulation for following the lead of Oregon and Washington's COVID-19 rules.

Ana Padilla, executive director of the UC Merced Community and Labor Center, said the regulation is greatly needed. Since March, 14 counties have seen a rise of more than 50% in immigrant Latino deaths, “several with large establishments in industries with long records of employer noncompliance, most notably in agriculture and meatpacking,” she said.

Farm groups on the Central Coast, on the other hand, were among the first to establish isolation housing and rapid testing programs specifically for farmworkers.

“In this region, we have not had the case clusters or the large number of cases associated directly with employer-provided housing,” said Chris Valadez, president of the Grower-Shipper Association of Central California. “The regulation recognizes but doesn't necessarily connect the fact that there's an infrastructure in place today.”

Valadez explained that part of that effort has been to include screens in employee housing and other “engineering controls” when six feet of separation is not possible. Board members acknowledged that even six feet when indoors for long periods does not eliminate risk. Other agricultural members called for the six feet to be measured between head spaces and not bunk-to-bunk.

Separating workers by three feet on transportation, meanwhile, would allow for just a driver and three workers for each ride in a 15-passenger van, according to Matt Rogers, the general manager for AgSocio, an agricultural employer in the Central Coast area.

“The requirement may very well set back safe agricultural transportation in this state,” he said, calling it unaffordable and arguing it would push employees to pile into private cars with no safety measures.



Grower-Shipper Association of Central California President Chris Valadez

The labor contractor had a number of safety standards in place for nine months. Rogers said these mitigation efforts prevented virus spread in two cases when infected workers rode in the company's transportation service and lived in its housing. He feared AgSocio would not be able to meet the new requirements, setting him back for 2021 contracts already signed and leading to a loss of agricultural clients.

“I understand that there are going to be short-term costs and burdens as a result of this rule,” said Cal/OSHA Chief Doug Parker. “But the human and economic costs are extremely high of not acting and doing more to prevent the spread and transmission of COVID-19.”

He described the threat as “the most significant workplace hazard in the history” of the division, which requires an “aggressive” and “serious” rule. Parker asserted the requirements for pay and benefits are not out of Cal/OSHA's jurisdiction and that the regulation is consistent with laws like AB 685 and existing local and state ordinances.

“In terms of implementation, we understand that this is not going to be any small task,” he said. “It does have some complexity.”

Parker added that Cal/OSHA will take into account the fact that some employers will need more time. He dismissed concerns about the social spread of the virus coming into the workplace, calling those distinctions irrelevant once the coronavirus is onsite. As far as inhibiting the Housing for the Harvest program, Parker said that is not the intention and the inspectors will have to make that decision on a case-by-case basis.

“Do you really think that this regulation, as it's being proposed, will bridge the gap for agriculture, retail, restaurants, schools and hotels,” said Chris Laszcz-Davis, the management representative on the Cal/OSHA board, “if it's not entirely clear in terms of nuanced interpretation and implementation?”

In terms of providing clarity to employers, responded Parker, “that's where our implementation strategy kicks in.”

Laszcz-Davis also pushed for forming an advisory committee to begin meeting immediately to start considering revisions to the regulation. Board Chair David Thomas agreed, adding Cal/OSHA should act quickly to “allay the fears of some of the employers,” but said the regulation itself should not be delayed any longer.

“We're seeing the worst of this right now,” he said. “We've got to lead at some point. Nobody else is doing it. We have no leadership from D.C.”

Thomas had not heard from the federal COVID-19 Task Force in months.

Upon approving the emergency regulation, the board passed it to the Office of Administrative Law for review, which adds another opportunity for public comment. The regulation is effective for 180 days, and the board can decide then whether to extend it or proceed with a formal rulemaking for a permanent standard.

Food, ag industry likely to be priority for vaccine, but timing uncertain

The Trump administration's plans for distributing COVID-19 vaccines put a priority on inoculating workers in the food and agriculture sector, but how quickly the shots become available to the industry still depends to some extent on how fast the vaccine can be distributed.

According to interim guidance released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in late October, **the priority populations in the first phase of vaccine distribution include health care personnel exposed to COVID patients, essential workers employed outside of health care, adults with high-risk medical conditions and people over 65 years of age.**

The document indicates some people in the phase-one group may not get inoculated until the second and third phases of distribution, depending on availability of vaccines, the first of which is nearing approval.

A separate CDC presentation to an advisory committee on Monday evaluated vaccine distribution priorities based on three ethical principles: maximizing benefits and minimizing harms; promoting justice, and mitigating health inequities.

The analysis said that the 87 million essential workers in non-healthcare sectors such as food and ag were unable to work from home, increasing their exposure to the virus, and were disproportionately from racial and ethnic minorities. About one in four essential workers also are from low-income households, according to the analysis.



Farm and food workers have long used personal protective equipment for food safety reasons, but additional steps have been taken during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Food and agribusiness groups have sent separate letters to the Trump administration and to the transition officials with President-elect Joe Biden appealing to them to prioritize the vaccination of food and agriculture workers, who the Homeland Security Department classified as essential workers at the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic.

In a Nov. 18 letter to Biden, the groups said, “Once a vaccine for COVID-19 is developed and approved for distribution, it is imperative that the federal government, led by your administration, prioritize our nation’s food, agriculture, and retail workers for vaccination among other key population groups, to help keep workers healthy and to ensure that agricultural and food supply chains remain operating.

“Our industries stand ready to partner with your administration to ensure a strong, coordinated public education campaign brings widespread and sustained acceptance of vaccinations among the public.”

The groups that signed the letter included the American Bakers Association, Consumer Brands Association, FMI-The Food Industry Association (representing national and regional supermarket chains), International Dairy Foods Association, National Restaurant Association, North American Meat Institute and the United Fresh Produce Association.

In a note to members last week, the International Dairy Foods Association said it has confirmed “in conversations and meetings with FDA officials, and through recently published materials ... that food industry workers are considered essential and a priority population” for the vaccine.

IDFA spokesman Matt Herrick said based on the draft CDC guidance, his group is **“confident that the federal government will prioritize food and agricultural workers due to the nature of their work as part of the nation’s critical infrastructure industries.”**

The first phase of distribution, according to the CDC plan, assumes a limited supply of vaccines and calls for starting with health care personnel who are potentially exposed to the virus.

Phase two of the plan assumes a “large number of doses” are available and calls for inoculating remaining groups from phase one and expanding to the general population. The distribution program moves into phase three when there are sufficient doses for the entire U.S. population. Three vaccines have shown strong promise so far, and the Food and Drug Administration has scheduled an advisory committee meeting Dec. 10 to consider approving one produced by Pfizer Inc. and Germany-based BioNTech Manufacturing.

States are also finalizing their own plans, and industry sources say they are tracking close to the CDC in prioritizing populations. **The draft version of California's phased plan mirrors the CDC's, with essential workers outside of health care included in "phase 1-B." Among the priority populations in Texas' plan are "frontline" employees, including workers in food and agriculture.**

The United Food and Commercial Workers International union also is working with employers and calling for industry workers to be given priority for the vaccines. **"For the sake of our food supply and protecting essential workers, UFCW is working with elected and business leaders across the country to ensure that these critical frontline workers are prioritized for early access to a vaccine as they continue to keep our food supply secure during this crisis," said union Vice President Mark Lauritsen.**

Meatpacking giant Tyson Foods Inc. is working with outside medical experts, including Matrix Medical, on planning and distribution models for the Tyson workforce. The goal is to “enable our team members to get access to a vaccine when one becomes available in a timely manner,” said spokesman Derek Burlison.

Tyson is one of several meat processors that have struggled to contain outbreaks at plants. He said the company is testing “thousands of workers a week, including employees who have no symptoms.”

Last week, the company suspended without pay some employees who were allegedly betting on how many workers at a Waterloo, Iowa, packing plant would get ill from COVID-19. The company also hired former Attorney General Eric Holder to investigate the allegations that were made in amendments to a lawsuit filed against the company by the family of a Tyson employee who died.

Farm groups count on Biden to reengage with Cuba

President-elect Joe Biden promised on the campaign trail to reverse the Trump administration's policy of breaking ties with Cuba, and that has U.S. farm groups once again hoping their farmers will benefit with increased trade.

Cuba, despite all of the trade and travel restrictions imposed by the U.S., remains the fourth largest foreign market for U.S. poultry, and the American ag sector wants to see the island nation return to making large purchases of rice, wheat, corn and soybeans. It started to look like that might be possible toward the end of the Obama administration, as the two countries reforged ties and encouraged travel, but that came to a halt in 2017.

“We need a new Cuba policy,” Biden said this summer during a campaign swing through Florida. “The (Trump) administration's approach is not working. Cuba is no closer to freedom and democracy than it was four years ago.”



President-elect Joe Biden (Photo: Biden campaign)

Although there were no major Cuba trade breakthroughs during the years that Obama and Biden were in the White House, momentum was building towards that goal, says Doug Keesling, a farmer, business owner and member of the Kansas Wheat Commission. **“I see a new administration and it's a new day. ... We're putting new seed in the ground with a new administration, looking for a good harvest.”**

Biden stoked that optimism on the campaign trail this year, telling CBS Miami in an interview that he intends to go back to the Obama policy of strengthening ties with Cuba.

“What we did when we changed the policy — we began to open up and get so much more support from the region and that's what we should be doing right now,” Biden said. “There's no reason to continue the policy that Trump has put in place.”

While Biden's comments on the campaign trail may have boosted those hoping for a better trading relationship with Cuba, voters in South Florida also reacted to the idea. There, President Donald Trump outperformed some expectations and Republicans were also able to flip a Miami-area congressional seat.

Cuba imports about \$2 billion worth of ag commodities per year, and the U.S. — which lies only about 100 miles to the north of the island nation — supplies only about 10% of that demand, says Paul Johnson, president of the U.S. Agriculture Coalition for Cuba (USACC).

“It's exciting times right now,” Keesling told *Agri-Pulse* about the potential of regaining a share of the Cuban market.

Cuba imports about 30 million bushels of wheat every year, and the U.S. Wheat Associates — a member of the USACC — says it should be buying most, or all, of it from the U.S. because of the proximity between buyers and sellers. But Cuba hasn't bought any U.S. wheat since 2011, importing instead from Europe and Canada.

“The United States has a natural advantage in that region, with an 80% share of the wheat market over the past decade,” according to an analysis by USW. **“In the nearby Dominican Republic, U.S. wheat typically has a market share of over 90%.”**

U.S. rice farmers also have a lot to gain from getting back into the Cuban market, where they once sold tens of millions of dollars of the grain.

“It has been USA Rice’s long-standing policy that we support restoration of normal commercial trade and travel between the United States and Cuba, and we look forward to working with the Biden Administration and the 117th Congress to restore this once thriving market for U.S. grown rice,” USA Rice Federation President Betsy Ward told *Agri-Pulse*.



Betsy Ward, USA Rice Federation

The U.S. sold \$64 million worth of rice to Cuba in 2004, but the totals have declined since then, reaching zero in 2009. There were some relatively small shipments in 2012 and 2017, but nowhere near previous levels.

There are plenty of Trump’s restrictions that Biden will be able to peel back almost immediately, including travel restrictions such as the one enacted in September that prohibits Americans from staying in most of the hotels in Cuba.

“Today, as part of our continuing fight against communist oppression, I am announcing that the Treasury Department will prohibit U.S. travelers from staying at properties owned by the Cuban government,” Trump announced in a September speech. He also announced restrictions on bringing back tobacco and alcohol from Cuba.

Repealing travel and other restrictions would be a good start and it’s what the coalition is calling for, but the key change in policy for ag trade will need congressional action.

It was the Trade Sanctions Reform and Export Enhancement Act of 2000 that allowed the U.S. to export farm commodities to Cuba, but it also requires Cubans to pay cash in advance for U.S. rice, corn, wheat and other commodities. The Treasury Department tightened those payment provisions further in 2005, requiring U.S. sellers be paid even before the shipment leaves the U.S. port.

All of this makes the U.S. less competitive, especially when government-subsidized exporters in countries like Vietnam or Thailand offer multi-year financing.

“We’re not asking for public money,” USACC’s Johnson said. “We’re asking for individuals and companies to be able to take the risk of repayment of debt.”

Steve Mercer, a spokesman for the U.S. Wheat Associates, says the ability to offer credit to Cubans will be key.

“Other people are offering credit, which for a country that doesn’t have access to a lot of U.S. dollars – that’s a huge thing.”

But for now, Johnson says he’s just hoping the incoming Biden administration will undo the complications to trade with Cuba that the Trump administration set. At a minimum, Johnson said he expects the harsh anti-Cuba rhetoric to stop flowing from the White House.

“U.S. wheat growers would be very happy to see diplomatic relations renewed with Cuba and the renewal of the opportunity to once again share our wheat with the Cuban people,” Mercer said.

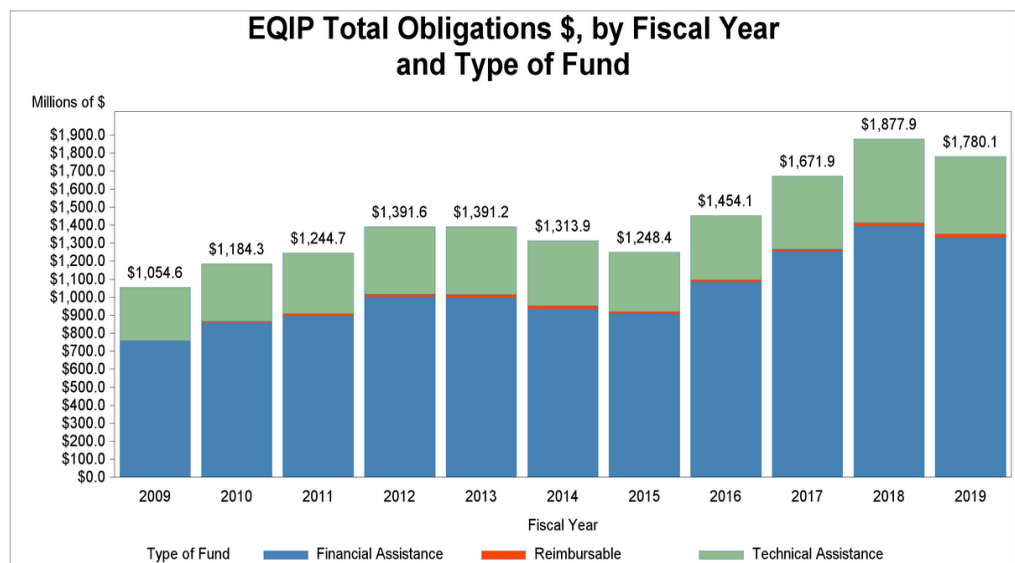
Program flexibility, experimentation drive EQIP popularity

The Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) has grown in popularity over the years, and with that popularity, demand far outstrips the number of contracts approved.

From fiscal years 2009 to 2019, financial assistance distributed through the EQIP program has increased from \$757 million to \$1.32 billion, according to [USDA](#).

According to [NRCS data](#) and USDA officials, there were 31,960 approved contracts out of 110,077 applications in 2009, compared to 41,471 approved contracts out of 149,574 in 2019. NRCS Deputy of Programs Chief Jimmy Bramblett told *Agri-Pulse* EQIP is popular because it addresses acute conservation needs such as waste storage facilities on dairy farms or managing a newly formed gully in a cornfield after a weather disaster.

EQIP was first authorized in the 1996 farm bill and is a voluntary program providing money and technical assistance through contracts of 10 years or less to producers who implement conservation practices to improve soil, water, plant, air and other resources on agricultural land, according to USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service.



Source: NRCS

The Department of Agriculture finalized a [rule](#) Oct. 23 to codify changes to EQIP contained in the 2018 farm bill. Among other things, it made changes in how EQIP interacts with the

Regional Conservation Partnership Program, added “increased weather volatility” as a resource concern, and clarifies implementation of comprehensive nutrient management plans.

NRCS also allows a waiver to the \$450,000 regulatory contract limitation and established a \$900,000 regulatory contract limitation for Water Management Entities that are conducting water distribution and water conservation projects.

NRCS may also waive Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) limitations. The contract limitation may be waived up to \$900,000 for group projects or joint ventures.

While acknowledging several improvements, Michael Happ, conservation policy specialist with the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, said increasing payment limitations is a problem because it will allow fewer people to participate in the program and lead to oversubscription issues.

“EQIP is meant to help farmers who might not have the resources to conserve these resources on their own, and the way the program is written right now, a lot of the money is running out because (USDA) is giving money to some of the largest farms,” Happ told *Agri-Pulse*.



Michael Happ, NSAC

NRCS uses a scoring system to award contracts, and Happ said when larger operations and larger contracts score highly, there is less money left over for smaller contracts.

Bramblett pushed back, saying the program is size-neutral, and local and county technical committees help with prioritizing certain conservation practices.

Jeff Schahczenski, natural resources economist at the National Center for Appropriate Technology, also said “there’s only so much money” and time to distribute the available funds.

“If you have the ability to give bigger amounts away then you can’t distribute it more broadly,” Schahczenski told *Agri-Pulse*.

But he hopes NRCS’ Conservation Assessment Ranking Tool (CART), developed in the 2018 farm bill, will help speed the application process and provide more understanding for producers.

“It will match up your assessment to what funds are available to help you. It will actually tell you ... how you rank in relationship to accessing that resource,” he said.

Coleman Garrison, director of governmental affairs at the National Association of Conservation Districts, said since the program can be targeted to localized water resource concerns like water quality, improving wildlife or soil health, that makes it competitive.

“I think it gives farmers more confidence that what they are doing and the practices that they are being cost-shared for or being helped to implement, are resource concerns that are going to help their land as well as help the natural resources in their area,” Garrison told *Agri-Pulse*.



Acting NRCS Chief Kevin Norton

Garrison said the program is also easy to understand, which makes it popular among farmers. For example, a farmer may have erosion concerns on their field and NRCS will create a plan with a variety of different options for the farmer to stop the erosion.

USDA Acting NRCS Chief Kevin Norton said flexibility of the program helps to manage oversubscriptions.

“The best way that we have to manage it is that it is the most flexible program that we have. It is statutorily built so that it can adapt

to each state and even regions within a state,” Norton told *Agri-Pulse*.

Norton argued updates to EQIP also require NRCS to offer an advance payment option for historically underserved producers. “If you’re an underserved socially disadvantaged farmer ... you automatically get an advance payment,” Norton said. Advanced payment options were offered before, but as an opt-in; the update requires an opt-out.

As more consumers are demanding their food be produced sustainably, Garrison said there will be a need for an “increase in funding in the overall conservation title of the next farm bill as well as EQIP,” but did not pick one program over the other.

News Briefs:

Lawmakers push for WHIP Plus to cover wildfires, other natural disasters.

Congressman Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., and Representatives Mike Thompson, D-Calif., Peter DeFazio, D-Ore., Barbara Lee, D-Calif., and Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., announced the introduction of the 2020 WHIP+ Reauthorization Act. This bipartisan bill, introduced by members from districts hit hard by wildfires, reactivates the Wildfire and Hurricane Indemnity Program Plus (WHIP+) for 2020 natural disasters, including wildfires. Currently, WHIP only covers losses incurred in 2018 and 2019, and this bill would extend that support to losses incurred in 2020. The WHIP program offers critical assistance to agricultural producers, including winegrape growers, whose crops were impacted by smoke taint. “This year, record-breaking wildfires wreaked havoc on many of our communities on the Central Coast of California. In addition to the structural damage, large swaths of our agriculture, including tons and tons of winegrapes, were tainted due to smoke exposure,” said Congressman Panetta. “WHIP+ historically has been a lifeline to producers who suffered this type of disaster. As it stands, unfortunately, the program does not cover 2020 losses. Our legislation, the 2020 WHIP+ Reauthorization Act, will ensure that wine grape growers, who suffered severe losses during this unprecedented wildfire year, are eligible for these crucial payments.” To see the full text of the 2020 WHIP+ Reauthorization Act, click [here](#).

‘AskUSDA’ launched as centralized inquiry portal for department. A new Department of Agriculture service will serve as a “front door” that aims to transform “how the public interacts with USDA.” According to a release, the new AskUSDA system will include phone, chat, and web inquiry services and will serve as a centralized contact center for the department’s

29 agencies and offices. “Prior to the creation and implementation of AskUSDA, members of the public had to navigate dozens of phone numbers and had no chat function or online platform for self-service, creating frustrations and inefficiencies,” USDA noted in a [release](#). “AskUSDA was created to make USDA more responsive to the public by providing a single destination for phone, chat, and web inquiries.” Streamlining IT services has long been a goal of the department, including working through the various applications producers might fill out for programs through the Farm Service Agency or Natural Resources Conservation Service. Some online application abilities have been added to the [farmers.gov](#) webpage, including the ability to apply for the Coronavirus Food Assistance Program. According to the department, a pilot of AskUSDA received more than 93,000 citizen inquiries and more than 1.4 million USDA article page views. The public can contact AskUSDA by phone at (833) ONE-USDA with representatives available 9 a.m.-5:30 p.m. EST weekdays. The website (<https://ask.usda.gov/>) is available 24/7 and includes live chat agents available 10 a.m.-6 p.m. EST on weekdays. Inquiries can also be sent via email at any time to askusda@usda.gov.

Study explores where plant-based alternatives are consumed. New data from The NPD Group show consumption of plant-based dairy alternatives is more likely to take place at home, but plant-based meat alternatives are more frequently eaten at restaurants. According to the data, 93% of meals or snacks that contain milk alternatives are consumed at home with the other 7% of consumption happening in a food service or restaurant setting. In contrast, consumers eat plant-based meat alternatives at restaurants 78% of the time. Darren Seifer, an NPD food and beverage industry analyst, explained the inverted preferences by noting plant-based meat alternatives “are prepared in the same way animal protein menu items are, which means the consumer isn’t sacrificing taste for what they believe to be a healthier option. It would be challenging to replicate the same taste at home.” As for the dairy alternatives, Seifer said those products “are an at-home choice because these beverages and foods are convenient as a ready-to-drink beverage or to use as an ingredient.” While plant-based meat alternative sales are still dwarfed by their conventional counterparts, dairy alternatives are rising in popularity. NPD cited the so-called “health-halo” of plant-based alternatives — which in many cases can be challenged — as part of the rationale. “Consumers see plant-based alternatives as healthier options to their traditional counterparts,” says Seifer. “Plant-based beverages and foods are growing and gaining loyalty. These products still represent a small share in the categories in which they compete, but do give consumers more options to consider.”

No-Till November campaign hopes to minimize tillage. The Natural Resources Conservation Service is encouraging California farmers to consider ways to minimize tillage operations. First launched in 2017, the NRCS No-Till November campaign encourages farmers to consider how they might give their tillage equipment in their machine sheds this fall and decrease soil disturbance. The campaign has reached more than 1.5 million people through Twitter and local media since it was launched. Minimizing tillage protects soil physical properties, thereby maintaining soil health and enhancing soil functions to hold and supply both water and nutrients to crops, and providing many conservation benefits to soil, water and air natural resources. “California farmers look for no-till benefits wherever they can, and NRCS is here to help you evaluate benefits of different tillage management,” said Carlos Suarez, NRCS State Conservationist in California. “Some of the corn and small grain silage systems have offered great opportunity for reduced tillage. No-till and reduce-till farming is one of many soil health conservation practices to promote water quality while saving farmers time and money. No-till November is an appropriate way to remind farmers about the important relationship between your tillage and soil health,” he said.

Interested in Farm to School grants? The California Department of Food and Agriculture Office of Farm to Fork would like your input on the 2021 Farm to School Incubator Grant Program's Request for Applications (RFA). But you'll have to hurry: Comments are due by 5 pm on Nov. 27. The Farm to School Incubator Grant Program will award competitive grants to support innovative local and regional farm to school projects in nutrition education, sustainable food production and procurement, and high-quality student engagement through experiential learning. Review the RFA for the grant program [here](#). The funding for this grant program was made available by the Budget Act of 2020, which includes a \$10 million one-time General Fund allocation for the 2020-21 fiscal year and \$1.5 million annually thereafter for CDFA to establish a Farm to School Incubator Grant Program and provide ongoing support for the California Farm to School Network (CFSN). CFSN is a "one-stop shop" that works to align farm to school efforts, share resources and bring together farmers, schools, distributors and practitioners. Written comments should be submitted via email to: cafarmtofork@cdfa.ca.gov. Comments should include "Farm to School Stakeholder Comments" in the subject line of the email.

Beef commercials to appear during Hallmark Christmas movie breaks. Hallmark Channel Christmas movies are known for their ability to tug at the emotional heartstrings of viewers around this time of year. This year's commercial breaks, however, will tug on the hunger pangs of viewers in the same way. The National Cattlemen's Beef Association — through its capacity as a contractor to the beef checkoff — will run "Beef. It's What's For Dinner." commercials during this week's Hallmark Channel's Countdown to Christmas movies in an effort to get consumers excited about featuring beef during their holiday menus. "We are on a quest to take the holidays back," NCBA CEO Colin Woodall said on this week's *Agri-Pulse Open Mic*. "We love our friends in the turkey business, but they've had a good run; we want beef on the tables." The ads will feature 15-second snippets of the [Drool Log](#), a two-hour video of a prime rib cooking on rotisserie over an open flame. [According to NCBA](#), the ads will run more than 50 times before the end of the year. In addition to the ad spots, a broader "Beef. It's What's for Holiday Dinner." campaign also features Zoom backgrounds for those celebrating the holidays virtually, updated webpages with recipes and a "shoppable" platform, and e-commerce and influencer chef partnerships to boost the appeal of beef during the upcoming holiday season.

Farm Hands West: Holtermann tapped to lead the Water Association of Kern County

Jenny Holtermann is now the new executive director of the Water Association of Kern County. She was hired two months ago to fill the vacancy left when **Beth Pandol** retired from her post as the association's chief executive after 10 years at the helm. Holtermann is very active in other farming organizations. She is the current second vice president of the Kern County Farm Bureau and is the District 5 representative on the California Farm Bureau Federation's board of directors, representing Kern and Kings counties.

Sen. **Dianne Feinstein**, D-Calif., has announced she will not pursue a leadership position on the Senate Judiciary Committee or any other committee next year, but instead plans to focus her attention to two climate change issues that plague California: wildfires and drought.



Jenny Holtermann

Vanguard Direct have hired **Ethan Williams** as a senior sales associate located in the Bakersfield, Calif., office. Williams brings over 11 years of sales experience to the Vanguard Direct team. He previously worked for Pretty Lady Vineyards as a sales and operations manager.

Debbie Willmann has been promoted to director of sales for Index Fresh and will work to help expand the company’s customer network. Willmann has been with the company for 30 years and in her new role she will supervise the sales support department and be the sales liaison between operations, logistics, procurement, and the California field team.

President-elect **Joe Biden** has announced his nominees for and appointees to key national security and foreign policy posts. **Antony Blinken** has been chosen as the next Secretary of State, **Linda Thomas-Greenfield** has been selected to serve as the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations, and former Secretary of State **John Kerry** has been tapped as the special presidential envoy for climate.

Biden also has announced his appointments to members of the White House Senior Staff. **Reema Dodin** was appointed as deputy director of the White House Office of Legislative Affairs. Dodin currently serves as a volunteer on the Biden-Harris Transition Team, leading legislative engagement for the confirmations process. She also serves as the deputy chief of staff and floor director to the Senate Democratic Whip **Dick Durbin**, D-Ill. **Shuwanza Goff** has been selected to serve as the deputy director of the White House Office of Legislative Affairs. Goff previously served as floor director for the House of Representatives under House Majority Leader **Steny Hoyer**, D-Md.

Rep. **Dan Newhouse**, R-Wash., has been elected as chairman of the Western Caucus for the 117th Congress. Rep. **Paul Gosar**, R-Ariz., has served in the chairman role for the last four years. The Western Caucus is a bipartisan coalition that advocates for rural, western, and resource-based communities.

Tennessee native **Stephen Vaden** has been confirmed to be a judge of the United States Court of International Trade. Vaden has worked at USDA since 2018, most recently as general counsel.



Former Secretary of State **John Kerry**

NTCA-The Rural Broadband Association has added three people to the association’s staff. **Mano Koilpillai** has been hired as the new chief financial officer, **Roxanna Barboza** as industry and cybersecurity policy analyst and **Lauren Gaydos** as public relations manager. Before joining NTCA, Koilpillai was the founder and president of Dynamic Consulting and Accounting LLC. Barboza previously worked at USDA supporting its ReConnect Loan and Grant program.

Gaydos left Capitol Hill where she worked as the communications director for Rep. Brett Guthrie, R-Ky.

Rabo AgriFinance has tapped **Shawn Smeins** to lead the business. Smeins has been with the company for 27 years and has served as interim head of Rabo AgriFinance since August, following the departure of **Curt Hudnutt**.

Amy Byrick has joined Novozymes as the new executive vice president of strategy and business transformation. She previously worked at DuPont Nutrition and Biosciences, where she led the global food and beverage business. Before that, she was at Amcor working in various strategic and marketing management roles.

Ranking Member of the House Committee on Natural Resources **Rob Bishop**, R-Utah, has promoted **Annick Miller** to staff director for the Subcommittee on Water, Oceans and Wildlife. Miller replaces **William Ball**, who recently departed the Committee. Miller joined the committee in 2019 as professional staff on the subcommittee. She previously served as senior policy adviser for several western water agencies, the National Water Resources Association, and was legislative staff for former Natural Resources Committee Chairman, **Doc Hastings**, R-Wash.

The World Food Prize Foundation has hired **Austin Castillo-Leovan** as the new program coordinator. He will assist the director of global programs and partnerships for the foundation's global youth programs. Before joining the foundation, Castillo-Leovan was a program facilitator at Al Exito, where he co-facilitated a student run after-school programs for Latin/Hispanic youth.

The National Association of Farm Broadcasting has elected new officers for 2021. **Gale Cunningham** of WYXY Radio has succeeded **Rita Frazer** of RFD Radio Network as the president. Agri-Pulse's **Spencer Chase** is the incoming president-elect and **Joe Gill** of KASM has been elected national vice president. **DeLoss Janke** of the RFD Radio Network was elected as the organization's East Region vice president and **Paul Murphy-Spooner** of the United Soybean Board was elected as an Allied Industry Council representative.

After 23 years working for Monsanto/Bayer, **Mindy Whittle** has announced she is retiring from the company, effective Dec. 4. For the last 10 years, Whittle has served as the Oilseeds Industry Affairs Lead. In her retirement, she plans on exploring the world with her husband either by bike riding or hiking.

Best regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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