

Vilsack pledges 'significant' increase in meat processing

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack told senators Tuesday that his department is working on measures that will “significantly” increase U.S. meatpacking capacity, a top priority of producers who believe industry concentration is depressing livestock prices.

Testifying before the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, **Vilsack also endorsed the idea of creating a new office in USDA to investigate meatpacker purchasing practices and suggested that other agribusiness sectors were ripe for reform, implying that existing patent laws were discouraging competition in the seed business.**

Vilsack provided few clues as to what he would do to increase meat processing capacity, but he told Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., USDA was looking at offering low-interest loans for new processing facilities. Vilsack still has unspent funding available from coronavirus relief packages that Congress has passed.

“We are going to come up with a very creative way to significantly expand processing capacity in this country,” Vilsack said.



Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack (Photo by Adam Schultz / Biden for President)

After the hearing, *Agri-Pulse* asked Vilsack for more details about USDA’s plans, but he declined to elaborate. “More to come later,” he said.

In Vilsack’s view, increasing processing capacity would both help address producers’ pricing concerns as well as enable the industry to better shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic or the recent ransomware attack on sector giant JBS USA.

“If you have too much concentration you may have a very efficient system but you may have ... one that's not particularly resilient. I think we saw that during the pandemic,” Vilsack said.

He said the department would be making announcements in the new few weeks about funding for two small programs authorized to help small-scale processors. One would help processors qualify for federal inspection, which would, in turn, enable them to sell across state lines and into export markets. Another would reduce the overtime fees that small processors must pay for federal inspection services.

Vilsack also told the senators that in wake of the JBS hacking, USDA would be working with the food industry to ensure that companies are implementing protections against hacking.

“We're going to convene food groups to essentially make sure they understand and appreciate precisely ... what is required,” he said.

Vilsack's comments came as meat processor [Wholestone Farms announced a new \\$500 million pork processing facility in South Dakota.](#)

Concerns about meat industry consolidation and concentration have become bipartisan and taken on new urgency in the wake of the pandemic, and more recently, the JBS case. Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., suggested during Tuesday's hearing that the concerns extended to farm inputs.

“Are you concerned that within the ag community and the farming side of it that we've got issues of too much concentration within the supply side that farmers have to deal with?” Braun asked.

Vilsack responded that he thinks input costs are one reason many farmers can't support themselves on farm income, but patent protection was also contributing to the problem.



Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., (Photo: Joy Philippi)

“The question is whether or not it is discouraging additional competition by virtue of how much time we give (for patent protection) in this day and age of enormous, rapid change,” Vilsack said. “We ought to be taking a look at those issues, I think, to figure out ways in which we can moderate those (input cost) increases so that farmers have a chance of making more from their farm.”

Staffing issues also surfaced as a concern during the hearing.

Vilsack insisted that the Farm Service Agency and Natural Resources Conservation Service were keeping pace with handling program demands despite some local staff continuing to work remotely. He said that 75% of FSA staff were back in agency offices and almost the same percentage of NRCS staff.

He said that USDA was working on a return-to-work plan, but field offices were limited in how many people they could bring into their facilities in part because of social distancing requirements involving workers who aren't vaccinated against COVID-19.

“If you have to social distance, that creates an issue with reference to the size of the office (staff) itself. But I want to assure you that the work is getting done,” Vilsack told Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan.

Vilsack also used the hearing to press the appropriators to fund staffing increases in the department, particularly within Rural Development and NRCS.

The White House’s fiscal 2022 budget calls for 99,365 full-time equivalent staff at USDA, up from the estimated 96,072 on the payroll in FY21, which ends Sept. 30, and the 86,434 employed in FY20.

NRCS would have a staff of 11,011 in FY22, the same as in FY21 but up from 8,597 in FY20. The Rural Development staff would grow from 4,766 this year to 5,156 in FY22 under the proposed budget.

NRCS is viewed as critical to helping farmers implement climate-smart practices, a priority for the administration.

“There's a lot of work we can and should, and ought to be doing on the ground, and there are no better problem solvers I don't believe in all of government than the good folks that work at NRCS. There just aren't enough of them,” Vilsack said.

US and EU declare new era of trade cooperation

The U.S. and European Union remain at odds over major trade issues, but leaders announced a new age of cooperation Tuesday, and U.S. farmers stand to benefit if leaders can follow through on the goodwill expressed in Brussels this week.

U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai and European Commission Executive Vice President Valdis Dombrovskis [announced a deal aimed at ending tariffs tied to aircraft subsidies](#), but they and others stressed that the agreement is just the beginning of more cooperation on trade and other issues.

“This shows the new spirit of cooperation between the EU and the U.S. and that we can solve the other issues to our mutual benefit,” said Dombrovskis. “Together we can deliver for our citizens and businesses.”

A key dispute that the U.S. agriculture sector would like to see resolved is over U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from Europe, which resulted in EU tariffs on U.S. corn, rice and other commodities.

The U.S. and EU hope to have a resolution by the end of the year, both parties said in a joint statement Tuesday.



USTR Katherine Tai and European Commission official Valdis Dombrovskis discuss the U.S.-EU trade relationship. Photo: Twitter.

“We will engage in discussions to allow the resolution of existing differences on measures regarding steel and aluminum before the end of the year,” the statement said. “In this regard, we are determined to work together to resolve tensions arising from the U.S. application of tariffs on imports from the EU under U.S. Section 232, and will work towards allowing trade to recover from its 2020 lows and ending the WTO disputes.”

Another vexing problem for U.S. ag is the EU plan to impose new restrictions on U.S. dairy and meat.

Tai expressed optimism that the resolution to the dispute over aircraft subsidies would lead to more cooperation on other trade disputes and barriers.

The resolution on aircraft subsidies — including an agreement by the EU for a five-year suspension on U.S. wheat, orange juice, grapefruit, almonds, livestock feed and other commodities — represents an opportunity to rebuild U.S.-EU ties and “commit to working together on common challenges,” she said.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said Tuesday that she expects the U.S. and EU to end the dispute over steel and aluminum trade by December amid the new wave of cooperation.

“With that spirit, we’ve said. ‘Let’s sit down. Let’s sort this out together ... and get rid of this nuisance issue,’” she said.

It’s of particular importance to U.S. corn farmers because the EU levies a 25% tariff on the grain in retaliation for the U.S. steel and aluminum duties.

Neither Tai nor her European counterpart mentioned publicly the looming dispute over the EU’s plan to begin requiring [new health certificates for U.S. dairy and meat products this summer](#), but the National Milk Producers Federation, U.S. Dairy Export Council and U.S. lawmakers are hoping this is one more problem the two sides can resolve.

The NMPF and USDEC are lauding a new letter by Democratic and Republican lawmakers that asks the European Commission reconsider “these burdensome requirements and in the meantime delaying their effective date, so that U.S. exporters can assure their buyers that affected products will be available.”

Reps. Ron Kind, D-Wis., Jim Costa, D-Calif., John Katko, R-N.Y., and Jackie Walorski, R-Ind., signed on to the [letter this week to EU Ambassador Stavros Lambrinidis](#).

The EU is still on track to impose a host of new rules covering the importation of dairy, meat, eggs, seafood and composite food products on Aug. 21. Composite foods are a wide variety of products such as pizza, cheesecake and biscuits.



Krysta Harden, USDEC

The U.S. dairy industry says the rules would cripple trade, and there is evidence that U.S. exporters are already being impacted.

The [new regulations](#) require farms to receive frequent inspections for signs of foot and mouth disease and rinderpest as well as implement new record-keeping systems that would store years' worth of data on cows' health records and movements. The requirements are far too intrusive and force farmers to hand over too much information to foreign governments, say U.S. groups like the NMPF, USDEC and the International Dairy Foods Association.

"On behalf of America's dairy farmers, processors, and exporters, we thank Representatives Kind, Walorski, Costa and Katko for emphasizing to European leadership the need to prevent significant trade disruptions to U.S. dairy exports," said USDEC President and CEO Krysta Harden about the letter from lawmakers. "The U.S. government and American dairy industry have been making a reasonable request to delay implementation of the EU's new certification requirements, which fail to recognize the safety of U.S. dairy products and the high level of animal health protections in our industry."

The U.S. ships about \$100 million worth of dairy products each year to the EU, according to USDEC data.

U.S. government and European government officials tell *Agri-Pulse* that there are ongoing talks between Washington and Brussels to resolve the U.S. industry concerns or at least postpone the new health certificates.

States moving to require farms to pay overtime, despite federal exemption

Colorado lawmakers just passed a bill that will make the state the fifth in the nation to require farms to pay overtime to their workers, and farm groups expect more state legislatures to follow suit.

The Colorado bill, named [the Agricultural Workers' Rights Bill](#) and awaiting Democratic Gov. Jared Polis' expected signature, would require the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment to promulgate rules "providing meaningful overtime and maximum hours protections to agricultural employees."



Bruce Goldstein, Farmworker Justice

The bill is similar to laws enacted in California, New York, Maryland, Minnesota, and more recently, Washington to impose overtime requirements for farmworkers. Oregon lawmakers have been debating a similar measure.

California and Washington have the most comprehensive overtime laws, effectively removing the exemption that excluded farmworkers from the 40-hour overtime threshold mandated by the 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act.

Michael Marsh, president and CEO of the National Council of Agricultural Employers, said a bill to end the federal exemption is unlikely to pass this Congress [despite President Joe Biden's support](#), but Marsh predicted there would be an ongoing push "for the elimination of the exemption from overtime for agricultural workers ... on a state-by-state basis."

In February, [Democrats introduced a Biden-backed immigration bill](#) in the House and Senate that would require farms to start paying overtime and provide an expedited path to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers. The [353-page measure](#), which is built on Biden's immigration reform plan and called the U.S. Citizenship Act, effectively eliminates [the exemption](#) for farmworkers from federal overtime and minimum wage requirements that is in current law.

Bruce Goldstein, [president of the advocacy group Farmworker Justice](#), endorsed the bill. "Employers in the agricultural sector should modernize their labor relations and build profitability based on treating farmworkers with the dignity and respect they deserve," said Goldstein. "Farming's business models should not depend on exploitation and exclusions from labor protections."

Farmworker Justice has advocated that states take action on overtime laws.

In Colorado, a local advocacy group, [Project Protect Food System Workers](#), was one of the groups pushing for the state legislation. The group's website lists the Colorado bill as one of its three projects, saying it worked with state Sen. Jessie Danielson and Rep. Yadira Caraveo to get the Colorado Agricultural Workers' Rights Bill passed.

Project Protect Food System Workers also closely collaborates with Colorado Legal Services Migrant Farm Worker Division.

The final version of the Colorado bill states two representatives from Colorado Legal Services MFWD will sit on an agricultural work advisory committee made up of nine members, along with two current or former agricultural workers, two advocates of workers' rights, and three members representing agricultural employers.

The final bill was the result of negotiations and compromise between legislators, agricultural groups, and advocacy groups.

The bill originally would have required that farms pay overtime after 40 hours a week. Under the final bill, that threshold will instead be determined by the Colorado Department of Labor and Employment. That rulemaking process could allow more input from the ag industry, although the nine-person advisory committee will have only three members representing ag employers.

Zach Riley, senior director of public policy at the Colorado Farm Bureau, told *Agri-Pulse*, "The original text of the bill was rigid and punitive, now we believe that compromise can continue to bear fruit in the coming implementation of statute through rulemaking negotiations."

The Colorado Fruit and Vegetable Growers Association was also closely involved in negotiating amendments to make the bill more workable for farmers. For example, **the group obtained some exemptions from hand-weeding restrictions that were included in the bill. The exemptions would apply to transitional organic farmers and farmers using mulch or plastic coverings. An agricultural worker grievance process was also modified in the final bill.**

In Washington, the new overtime requirements were signed into law in May and welcomed by Biden.

"Agricultural workers in Washington and across the country have helped carry our nation through this pandemic — working long hours, often at great personal risk, to meet the needs of their communities and keep America healthy and well-nourished," Biden said in a statement issued by the White House. "These overtime protections will ensure that agricultural workers in Washington are paid for all of the vital work they do."

Under the Washington law, the overtime threshold will lower each year until it reaches 40 hours in 2024. The law stemmed from a lawsuit brought against a dairy that could have resulted in Washington dairy farmers having to pay overtime retroactively.

In Oregon, an ag worker overtime bill that would have kicked in at 40 hours stalled in the legislature, largely because "it would have been the most aggressive overtime policy in the country," Samantha Bayer, the policy counsel at Oregon Farm Bureau, told *Agri-Pulse*.



Samantha Bayer, Oregon Farm Bureau

But she expects farmworker advocates to continue pressing for a state law. "I think it's almost guaranteed that the conversation is going to keep happening and the work group is going to keep working on it."

Bayer said Farm Bureaus in other states that have adopted these types of laws report that they are not resulting in more wages for farmworkers. "It's actually resulting in hours capped. So, the proposal that came forth wasn't actually going to meet the very good-natured policy objective which was to improve the lives of agricultural workers," she said

In New York, [Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed into law a farmworkers bill](#) in 2019, which, among other labor protections, created a 60-hour overtime threshold. The bill said the threshold would be revisited by a wage panel in a year, where the panel could lower the threshold or keep it the same. The board ultimately decided to postpone the decision due to the pandemic.

In California, [farmers have been operating under a state overtime requirement since 2019](#). California's law gradually implemented overtime pay, so that large farms will have a 40 hour overtime threshold by 2022 and small farms will follow by 2025.

Josh Roberts, a farmer in California's Salinas Valley, told *Agri-Pulse* that it is turning out to be less expensive to pay overtime to existing workers rather than hiring additional employees.

"The margins on farming are getting pushed out," Roberts said in an interview with *Agri-Pulse*. "So, it's incumbent upon us to use the most productive, stable labor force that we can find."

Roberts said farmers in other states facing new overtime requirements are likely to discover it's also hard to hire additional workers or find housing for them. Now, he's trying to focus on keeping his current workers happy.

"We'd rather invest in our crews and see a declination of attrition and a higher year-over-year return rate than having to retrain and carry the overhead of too many people," he said.

Forests get more attention as Biden administration pushes climate priorities

The Biden administration's climate goals are bringing attention to the role of forests in storing carbon and the need to offer incentives to private forest owners to manage their trees sustainably.

"Climate-smart forestry policies offer both tools to reduce carbon pollution and an important opportunity to develop new revenue streams for family foresters," Senate Ag Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said as she opened a hearing in May about [opportunities for federal, state and privately owned forestlands to address climate change](#).

Stabenow has introduced the [Rural Forest Markets Act](#), which would call on USDA to guarantee investments in private forest carbon market programs. The bill has been read twice and sent to the full committee which, according to spokesman Patrick Delaney, is "looking for every opportunity to move the legislation forward."

Kedren Dillard, whose family owns about 100 acres of forest land in Virginia, said the bill would help people with small forests who either can't afford or aren't eligible for carbon markets aimed at large landholders. Those markets typically calculate carbon sequestration from changed management practices that owners invest in and then sell carbon credits, sharing the resulting profit with the forest owner. The process can stretch across many years.

"We can do much more with our forests if we empower family forest owners, including African American owners like me, with the right tools and policy support," she said. The Rural Forest Markets Act intends to make carbon markets accessible to family forest owners by spurring private investment in the program, which is then used to incentivize property owners to enroll. Dillard represents the [Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program](#) and sits on the board of the [American Forest Foundation](#) (AFF), which offers a carbon market for small forests (typically under 1,000 acres).

"Most families simply do not have the resources for upfront expenses and the ability to wait years for a return," Dillard said.

Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark., the agriculture committee's ranking member, said climate-smart forest management has the potential to benefit the environment, public and private forests, the wood products industry and rural economies. But, he cautioned, "as Congress and the administration consider strategies to promote voluntary participation in combating climate change, we must avoid policies that take forest land out of production or that deter sound management practices."



Kedren Dillard, private forestland owner.

For timber companies, sustainable management means reforestation at the same rate as harvesting, which is how Jamestown LP operates, according to Troy Harris, managing director of timberland for the Atlanta-based company that owns forestland throughout the eastern United States. Harris, who also testified at the ag committee hearing, serves on the board of the National Alliance of Forest Owners.

“Forests are the optimal land use for maximizing carbon storage,” he told the committee, encouraging members to take action to further expand sustainable building. In his written testimony, he called for using the tax code to “incentivize increased forest carbon sequestration and storage,” adding USDA could “support voluntary carbon registries and updated protocols that maintain rigor while removing barriers to entry.”

The [Growing Climate Solutions Act](#) would establish technical assistance and third-party verification for carbon (and other ecosystem services) markets to make the markets more accessible to farmers, ranchers and private forest landowners. Technical assistance can be something forest owners really need as they consider changing their management practices to achieve climate goals. Under the Act, “USDA will be the one-stop-shop for all carbon market resources,” says Natalie Alex, policy manager at the AFF.

She adds that a loan or bond guarantee from USDA, called for in the Rural Forest Markets Act, would reduce the risk for investors who want to participate in the AFF Family Forest Carbon Program but may not see returns for decades. **“In case we can’t sell the carbon on the market, they still get their return on investment,” Alex says. But the Congressional Budget Office gave the bill a score of zero, suggesting it doesn’t expect USDA would have to pay out much, if anything, and AFF already has signed contracts from companies ready to buy carbon as soon as it’s available.**

As for public forests, Forest Service Chief Vicki Christiansen, testifying before a [House appropriations subcommittee about her agency's FY22 budget](#), said the country’s public forests are facing longer and more intense wildfire seasons, drought, invasive species and attacks from insects and disease. Still, she said the Forest Service “stands ready to meet these challenges and advance the Administration’s climate goals.”

As an example, she said the Forest Service is increasing carbon sequestration through reforestation by “planting the right species, in the right place, under the right conditions, so forests will remain healthy over time.” But, she added, the current plans call for reforestation of 1.3 million acres of National Forest System land, accounting for only one-third of the need.

Still, increased attention to trees’ carbon-sequestering prowess and searing images of wildfires whipping through public and private lands have raised the national profile of forests.

“We’re starting to see this energy around forests and climate change,” said Elizabeth Greener, AFF’s communications director, adding that it’s “wonderful to see them brought to the forefront.”

New Missouri River port offers more market opportunities for producers

A newly constructed barge terminal for loading and unloading on the Missouri River in western Iowa should provide a new marketing option for Midwest corn and soybean producers. The facility's ability to ship millions of bushels of row crops downstream toward the Mississippi River could also increase the prices grain buyers will pay for their grain.

The Port of Blencoe, operated by NEW Cooperative Inc. officially opened earlier this month in Blencoe, Iowa, between Omaha, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa. The port will be served roughly seventeen times a year by about six barges and a single towboat.

Access to river barges means farmers will get paid higher prices for their crops by shrinking the local basis, the difference between the local cash market and the futures price. Allendale broker Mike Lung said just in the last month, the cash price "skyrocketed" in Manona County leading up to the port opening.

Instead of a basis near 35 to 40 cents under, "this port could potentially see that normalize near 25 to 30 cents under the Board price in years where we are well supplied," Lung told *Agri-Pulse*.

This new port is 36 miles north of the next port at Blair, Neb. Until 2004, barges also docked at the Big Soo Terminal in Sioux City, 45 miles north of Blencoe. The Sioux City port averaged roughly 160 barges per year but hasn't since then, according to the [Sioux City Journal](#).

Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig said the Blencoe port will provide more direct international access to western Iowa farmers that they did not have before.



Iowa Ag Secretary Mike Naig

“It’s a doorway to global trade, I call it an on-ramp to the superhighway to the Gulf of Mexico,” Naig told *Agri-Pulse*.

Frank Huseman, operations manager for NEW Cooperative Inc. said developing the facility was a three-year process. The cooperative saw the barge terminal construction as an opportunity to reduce transportation costs of bringing fertilizer and other crop protection products upriver from New Orleans.

“We have the ability to bring roughly 120,000 tons up or about 80 barges coming upstream,” he told *Agri-Pulse*.

Before, any fertilizer the NEW Cooperative purchased heading up the Mississippi River had to be dropped off in Dubuque, Iowa on the eastern side of the state and then trucked to retailers.

Huseman said the company will be able to ship roughly four million bushels of corn or soybeans back downstream each year, and they hope to increase loads in the future. [According to the Iowa Corn Growers Association](#), 2.06 billion bushels of corn were exported from the state in 2019.

Mike Steenhoek, executive director of the Soy Transportation Coalition, assisted NEW Cooperative with the planning and constructing phases of the project.

Steenhoek noted the facility is expected to annually accommodate 240,000 tons of soybeans, corn, dried distillers’ grains, dry fertilizers, ag lime, scrap metal, and rock.

“One of the motivating factors toward this facility is you have a strong export program and a lot of international demand for soybeans, but yet (NEW Cooperative) has had limited ability to capitalize on that,” Steenhoek told *Agri-Pulse*.

Steenhoek noted western Iowa soybean farmers often experience some of the widest and most negative basis levels in the state. The basis is normally wider the farther a farm is from its market.

For the last 25 years, Larry Buss, a farmer from Missouri Valley, Iowa, has hauled his corn and soybeans to a Cargill terminal at Blair, just north of Omaha, or to a Bunge terminal south of Council Bluffs, Iowa, because prices were better. He said he hopes the new port will provide more competitive basis prices in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska. He said he expects the basis to be closer to what it is at the Mississippi River ports in eastern Iowa.

Buss said there really hasn't been any barge traffic going north of Blair, Neb., until now. He hopes the port will be a catalyst to show other entities to invest in more ports on the Missouri River.

Steenhoek said that building a barge terminal on the Missouri River comes with risks because of rising and falling water levels on the river. The Army Corps of Engineers regulates the amount of water released from upstream.

“With the Missouri River, the potential is even greater because they don't have an inventory of locks and dams that can help regulate the water level like we see on the Mississippi and other rivers,” he said.



Mike Steenhoek, Soy Transportation Coalition

The Army Corps of Engineers regulates flows from upstream reservoirs to address a series of needs, including maintaining sufficient water in the lakes to protect wildlife and maintain recreation usage.

Huseman said the cooperative went into this project understanding that they would have to address variations in water levels, including the possibility of excessively high Mississippi River levels. In the past, barges have sometimes made it down the Missouri River only to be unable to get into the Mississippi because the water levels were too high.

“Any time you are dealing with this type of a facility, you have to be aware it's a little different ballgame that you are dealing with,” he said. Huseman said the facility is designed to operate in low water levels as well as high. If water levels are too low or too high, they can transport products by rail or truck if necessary.

Steenhoek said the Missouri River should be an engine of economic growth for industries and communities in western Iowa, eastern Nebraska, eastern Kansas, southern South Dakota, and Missouri.

“The river is more reliable than a lot of people think and that is one of the messages we are going to continue to convey throughout this year,” Steenhoek said.

Amid DPR, EPA reviews, Walmart calls on produce suppliers to reduce pesticide use

Walmart has announced it will phase in new guidelines for its fresh produce and flower suppliers including reducing their use of certain pesticides, even as both the Environmental Protection Agency and the California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) complete re-evaluations of the same chemicals.

“To help improve pollinator health and biodiversity in the regions in which we operate, Walmart U.S. is announcing new [pollinator commitments](#),” wrote [Martin Mundo, a Walmart senior vice president, on the company’s website](#).

Walmart’s suppliers will need to phase out the use of chlorpyrifos and certain neonicotinoid pesticides. California and Hawaii have already banned chlorpyrifos (and New York is phasing it out), while the [EPA released a new draft risk assessment](#) of it last year.

The class of substances known as [neonicotinoids](#) includes various insecticides, of which imidacloprid, thiamethoxam, clothianidin, dinotefuran, nitenpyram, acetamiprid and thiacloprid are the most widely known, according to Bayer CropScience.

Neonicotinoids are currently undergoing reevaluation at both the EPA and the DPR. After extensive public comments, California expects rulemaking to begin this year. Its scientists have concluded “mitigation on neonicotinoid use is necessary based on the findings during the department’s neonicotinoid reevaluation,” according to a DPR spokesperson.

[Walmart’s sustainability guidelines](#) also state the company will source all of its produce and flowers “from suppliers that adopt integrated pest management practices, as verified by a third-party, by 2025.”

Integrated pest management (IPM) provides “a decision-making framework for growers,” says Ariel Larson, senior project manager for the Sustainable Food Group team at the IPM Institute of North America in Madison, Wisconsin. She says it gives the growers tools “to assess their pesticide use and assess their risks associated with it.”

The IPM Institute has worked with Walmart, Sysco, Whole Foods and other companies on their sustainability goals. She says in recent years, consumers have driven the push toward more transparency and sustainability in the food supply chain, which has increased businesses’ interest in such programs.



Ariel Larson, IPM Institute of North America

“Our purpose, and our mission, has been to use the power of the marketplace,” she says, “and work with companies to help drive progress in sustainable agriculture through adoption of integrated pest management and other sustainability best practices.”

With IPM, she says, “growers have options to use the tools that they need, but they are only used, basically, as a last resort after nonchemical options have been used.” With organic

certification at one end of the spectrum and what Larson describes as “calendar-based” pesticide spraying (applying chemicals on a schedule rather than in response to a need) on the other end, IPM offers a middle path.

Although she couldn’t speak specifically to her work with Walmart, she says “typically companies are trying to work with their suppliers to improve practices” rather than switch to suppliers who are already using IPM.

Larson says it’s “certainly notable that there’s a 3rd party verification component” to Walmart’s policy because it means auditors can visit fields and question growers and report back to Walmart whether what a farm claims to be doing is really happening.



Healthy pollinator habitat is one goal Walmart has cited in rolling out its new sustainability guidelines for produce and flower suppliers. Image courtesy of USDA Flickr.

The IPM Institute’s Sustainable Food Group is one of the certifying bodies Walmart will recognize. Some of the others include Bee Better Certified, Fair Trade International and Rainforest Alliance. And the company says “suppliers with regional or crop-specific certifications that include strong IPM criteria can reach out to Walmart and request that their certification is benchmarked against the criteria.” USDA organic and international organic labels meeting USDA’s criteria are also recognized.

Some growers likely are already meeting Walmart’s new goals, while others may have to make some

adjustments. California grower Steve Brazeel of SunTerra says he’ll carefully review all of the expectations to make sure he’s meeting them, but says it likely will come down to demonstrating what they’re already doing rather than having to change things.

“Our goal as a provider to all retailers, including Walmart,” he says, “is to meet and exceed any kind of sustainability goals that are out there.”

News Briefs:

Tractor sales down in May, total sales rebound from 2020. The Association of Equipment Manufacturer’s Ag Tractor and Combine Report indicates that total farm tractor sales in May were down 3.9% compared to 2020 figures, but sales of larger tractors were on the upswing. Sales of two-wheel drive tractors were down 4.2%, with less than 40 horsepower tractors down 8.7% and more than 100 horsepower tractors up 28.6%. Sales of four-wheel-drive tractors shot up by 62.2%, from 156 in 2020 to 253 in 2021. However, year-to-date total sales for 2021 increased by 25.8% compared to May 2020 figures, which were lowered by the halt in sales that occurred in February and March. Other than the first two months of the pandemic, monthly tractor sales in 2020 were [higher than the preceding 5-year average in almost every case, according to AEM.](#) The YTD figures are in line with [the AEM survey that was released in](#)

[March](#), in which 88% of equipment manufacturers reported a positive outlook for 2021. The AEM Ag Tractor and Combine Report is released monthly and is compiled via AEM member companies through proprietary statistical reporting programs.

Plant-based protein shipments up 60% from April 2020. Shipments of plant-based proteins from distributors to commercial restaurants in April showed a 60% increase over 2020 figures, according to the NPD Group. The large increase is partly due to the decline in shipments brought on by the pandemic in 2020, but even compared to pre-pandemic shipments in 2019, plant-based protein shipments were up 16% this year. Plant-based beef alternatives, which make up the largest portion of plant-based protein shipments, increased by 45% compared to April of last year and increased by 82% compared to April 2019. Chicken substitute shipments grew by 82% in April 2021 compared to last year and grew by 25% compared to two years ago. Fish plant-based analogue shipments increased by 181% this month in comparison to 2020 and by 78% compared to 2019, although it is only a small portion of the plant-based protein market. Classic plant-based proteins, like tempeh, tofu, nuts, grains, and vegetables, also showed strong growth in April according to the NPD Group's data. "There has been a lot of public discussion about plant-based beef and meat substitutes, and whether or not plant-based is a fad or a trend," [Tim Fires, president of NPD's SupplyTrack, said in a statement](#). "But the fact of the matter is, chefs and operators see the plant-based protein category as a flexible option for developing recipes and menu offerings that taste good, and their guests enjoy. Plant-based is now a staple in their repertoire."

Researchers discover 'antidote' for bees exposed to pesticides. By thinking small, a team of researchers might have just made a big step forward in the fight to protect bees from insecticides. Using a pollen-sized microparticle that contained a certain enzyme, a group of scientists was able to create an "antidote" to organophosphate-based insecticides, according to a Cornell University [release](#). The [resulting study](#) — funded by the USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture, the National Institutes of Health and the National Science Foundation — found that the bees that ingested high doses of these microparticles had a 100% survival rate when exposed to malathion, while bees that had no contact with the microparticles died. "We have a solution whereby beekeepers can feed their bees our microparticle products in pollen patties or in a sugar syrup, and it allows them to detoxify the hive of any pesticides that they might find," James Webb, a co-author of the paper and CEO of Beemunity, said in the release. Once the microparticles are ingested by bees, the enzymes they contain enter the bee's midgut, where they break down and detoxify pesticides. According to the release, Beemunity has expanded upon the research by putting an insect-protein shell around the particles and filling them with a "special absorptive oil." "Many insecticides, including widely-used neonicotinoids, are designed to target insect proteins, so the microparticle shell draws in the insecticide where it is sequestered inert within the casing," the release states. Over the summer, Beemunity will test the product on 240 hives in New Jersey. The goal is to launch products in February 2022.

Seed companies form coalition to clean up contaminated waste at Nebraska ethanol plant. Six seed companies have formed a coalition and applied to clean up environmental contamination at a currently inoperative AltEn ethanol plant near Mead, Nebraska. The AltEn Facility Response Group — comprised of AgReliant Genetics, Bayer U.S., Beck's Superior Hybrids, Corteva Agriscience, Syngenta Seeds and WinField Solutions — filed an application to the Nebraska Voluntary Cleanup Program to clean up the contaminated waste that was produced after AltEn used seed corn treated with pesticides to produce ethanol. According to [an Emergency Complaint and Order](#) issued by the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy (NDEE) on Feb. 20, AltEn produced both wastewater and distiller's

grain that contained “high levels” of pesticide residue. The AltEn plant was shut down in February. “This is a positive step towards implementing the long-term response actions needed at this facility,” Ed Chu, the acting regional administrator for Region 7 of the Environmental Protection Agency, said in a [release](#). He said local EPA officials would continue “to provide support and assistance to NDEE” so the contamination can be “properly and fully addressed.” [According to a release](#), the coalition will continue “interim remedial measures” at the site and work on developing a Remedial Action Plan for long-term cleanup. This action plan will first be subject to public notice and comment, and then to NDEE review and approval. The release states that the companies in the coalition have been voluntarily helping with cleanup since Feb. 12, mostly through regulating wastewater lagoon levels and managing the “environmental impacts of wet cake and waste materials” through containment and stormwater management.

Advocates question Beyond Meat claim. An organization that monitors the accuracy of advertising claims says that the maker of Beyond Meat is being untruthful when [it says on its website](#) that the plant-based products contain no “synthetically produced ingredients.” To make its case, the [advocacy group Truth in Advertising cites the presence of methylcellulose](#) and the products’ “natural flavors,” which may include synthetic chemicals, the group says. Beyond Meat calls methylcellulose a “plant fiber derivative.” Truth in Advertising cites a 2011 article on methylcellulose that says it doesn’t occur naturally and is produced by heating cellulose with a caustic solution and then treating it with methyl chloride. Natural flavors, “while derived from natural sources, such as plants, can comprise more than 100 chemicals, some of which may be synthetic,” says Truthinadvertising.org. Beyond Meat didn’t respond to a request for comment.

Pork processor Wholestone Farms to expand with \$500M South Dakota facility. Nebraska-based pork processor Wholestone Farms announced Monday that the company will be expanding into South Dakota with plans to build a \$500 million pork harvest and processing facility. The facility will be located in Sioux Falls and will employ about 1,100 people, according to a [release](#). The new facility will be just a few miles from an existing Smithfield pork processing plant in the city, expanding the pork processing capacity in the region. “Wholestone Farms and its farmer-owners have a strong culture of corporate citizenship and with many of our members currently living and doing business in the area, we look forward to being a preferred employer and impactful participant in the Sioux Falls community,” Luke Minion, the board chairman for Wholestone Farms, said in a release. The company — which was created in 2018 — is owned by 200 independent farmers that raise a combined total of 400,000 acres of cropland and 12 million pigs every year in the Midwest.

Farm Hands on the Potomac...



Val Dolcini

Val Dolcini has submitted his resignation, effective July 2, at the California Department of Pesticide Regulation and plans to return to Washington, D.C. California Gov. **Gavin Newsom** created the CalEPA deputy secretary for agriculture position for Dolcini in 2019, and after six months Dolcini later become head of CDPR. Dolcini previously served as the Farm Service Administrator during the Obama Administration. Dolcini was one of three who [recently announced plans to leave CDPR](#).

Charles Santerre has been named the chairperson for Clemson University’s Food, Nutrition and Packaging Sciences Department. Santerre comes to

Clemson after working at Purdue University as a professor of food toxicology. He also served as a [senior policy adviser for the Office of Science and Technology Policy in the Executive Office of the President](#) during the Trump Administration. In 2014, he was appointed to the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition's Food Advisory Committee, and in 2010 served as an American Association for the Advancement of Science fellow.

The U.S. Senate confirmed **Lina Khan** to the Federal Trade Commission with a final vote of 69-28 and shortly after, President Biden tapped her to serve as the new chair of the FTC, replacing **Rebecca Kelly Slaughter**. Slaughter has served as the acting FTC chair since January. Khan is an associate professor at Columbia Law School.

The Senate also confirmed **Michal Freedhoff** to be the next assistant administrator overseeing EPA's office of chemical safety and pollution prevention. Freedhoff has worked on Capitol Hill for over two decades, most recently as the minority director of oversight for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Finsbury Glover Hering has hired **Jenny Hopkinson** as a director in the firm's food and agriculture practice. Hopkinson most recently worked at the National Farmers Union.

Marvin Kokes has accepted a new job offer as the vice president of agribusiness lending for Farm Credit Services of America. Kokes previously worked at the National Cattlemen's Beef Association in industry and member services.

Mary Coppola Heslep has joined Ten Acre Marketing as senior vice president of creative. Coppola Heslep previously led the communication and marketing department at the United Fresh Produce Association over the past seven years.

Wade Boeshans has joined Summit Carbon Solutions as executive vice president. Boeshans most recently served as president and general manager of BNI Energy, an energy services and infrastructure company headquartered in Bismarck.

The National Association of State Departments of Agriculture has brought on **Tandy Kidd** as manager of events and member engagement and **Maria Martinez** as coordinator of programs and grants for the NASDA Foundation. Kidd most recently served as special project manager for the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture and Martinez previously served as a graduate teaching assistant for the University of Georgia and has prior experience with Kansas Corn, Yum Brands Co. and the National FFA Organization.



Tandy Kidd

Judd Gardner has been promoted to legislative director for Sen. **Jerry Moran**, R-Kan. Gardner previously was the deputy legislative director and handles the portfolio for agriculture and food, environmental protection, public lands and natural resources, animal welfare, and foreign trade.

Shelby Davis-Prettiman has moved up to legislative assistant from legislative correspondent in the office of Sen. **Chris Van Hollen**, D-Md. Davis-Prettiman will handle the portfolio for

agriculture and food, animal welfare, energy, environmental protection, public lands and natural resources, and the Chesapeake Bay.

Billy Fuerst now serves as Rep. **Fred Upton**'s, R-Mich., communications director. Fuerst previously was the deputy press secretary and a legislative correspondent.

Elizabeth Landau has been promoted to press secretary in the office of Sen. **Kirsten Gillibrand**, D-N.Y. Landau has been at Gillibrand's office for three years, most recently as deputy press secretary, and before that worked for Rational PR.



Cady Cooper

Cady Cooper is now a legislative aide in the office of Sen. **Cindy Hyde-Smith**, R-Miss. Cooper will work on issues related to health, immigration, science and technology. Cooper previously served as Hyde-Smith's constituent services representative.

Jared Honts has been moved to legislative aide from legislative correspondent in the office of Sen. **Rick Scott**, R-Fla. Honts helps work on the appropriations and health portfolios.

Safa Syed now serves as a legislative aide covering the animal welfare, appropriations, public lands and natural resources, and Native American portfolio for Sen. **Jeff Merkley**, D-Ore. Syed previously was a legislative correspondent.

Rep. **Dan Bishop**, R-N.C., has hired **Alex Stepahin** as a senior legislative assistant covering the Native Americans, public lands and natural resources portfolios. Stepahin previously worked in the office of Rep. **Jodey Arrington**, R-Texas, as a legislative assistant.

Kate Werley has changed roles from Rep. **Mike Doyle**'s, D-Pa., health policy adviser to his legislative director. Werley works on issues related to agriculture and food, animal welfare, appropriations, immigration, and international affairs.

Janet Montesi has joined the staff of Rep. **Kevin Brady**, R-Texas, as his new communications director. Montesi previously worked at the Federal Emergency Management Agency as a press secretary.

Abigail Hemenway has been elevated to legislative correspondent from staff assistant for Sen. **Lisa Murkowski**, R-Alaska. Hemenway previously worked on the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee as a staff assistant.

Judith Teruya now serves as a legislative assistant for Rep. **Grace Meng**, D-N.Y. Teruya handles the portfolios for animal welfare, energy, environmental protection, and Native Americans. Teruya previously served as an Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies fellow in Meng's office.

Tyler Brown has left the beltway and has moved back to Iowa to work for Sammons Financial Group Companies as the associate director of government relations. Brown was on Capitol Hill in the office of Sen. **Joni Ernst**, R-Iowa, as a legislative assistant covering tax, financial services, small business, budget, and appropriations issues.



Jim Spradlin

Christi Miller has joined the staff of the Missouri Department of Agriculture as its new communications director. She comes to the department after working the last 5 years as the program manager for Missouri Grown. She replaces **Sami Jo Freeman**, who has moved to the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services.

Chavonda Jacobs-Young, acting undersecretary for the Research, Education and Economics mission area and acting chief scientist of the Department of Agriculture, has joined the World Food Prize Foundation’s council of advisers.

Sally Flis has been tapped to be the 2021-2022 president-elect for the Council for Agricultural Science and Technology (CAST). Flis works at Nutrien Ag Solutions as the sustainable ag field manager. She is a member of and has chaired the Plant Ag and Environment workgroup (PWG) at CAST. She has also served on the board of directors since 2018 as the PWG liaison.

Former House Ag Committee Chairman **Mike Conaway** has joined the Texas Agricultural Land Trust board of directors. Conaway served eight terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, retiring in 2020 after serving 16 years in public service. Conaway will serve a three-year term as an at-large member of the board.

Jim Spradlin has announced he will retire as CEO of GROWMARK, effective Feb. 28. He has served in the GROWMARK system since 1982, first joining as an accounting trainee at Schuyler-Brown FS. GROWMARK is currently searching for Spradlin’s replacement and hopes to name someone by the fall so they can work alongside Spradlin before he leaves.

USDA Forest Service Chief **Vicki Christiansen** has announced her retirement after a 40-year career in the forestry industry. During her career, she has served as a professional forester, wildland firefighter, and land manager with 11 years of service at the Forest Service. She has served the last three years as the chief of the Forest Service. Christiansen will retire from federal service in August.



Vicki Christiansen

Best Regards,

Sara Wyant
Editor

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