

## News from Washington: February 8-12

### **House Ag Democrats Advance Ag Stimulus Package as GOP Attacks Minority Farmer Debt Relief**

Democrats forced a \$16.1 billion agriculture stimulus plan through the House Agriculture Committee on Wednesday, brushing aside Republican assertions that a provision providing debt relief for minority farmers was far too broad and could face legal challenges.

The package, which was approved on a party-line 25-23 vote during a seven-hour virtual meeting with members scattered across the country, will be folded into a broader \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill backed by President Joe Biden.

Democrats defeated almost every GOP attempt to alter the measure, including two amendments that would have scaled back provisions that will pay off USDA farm loans held by minority producers.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Historic \$1.9T Stimulus Plan Targets Minority Farmers as well as Supply Chain**

Democrats are moving to provide unprecedented amounts of debt relief and other assistance to Black farmers and other minority producers as part of a \$1.9 trillion stimulus package that's being designed to address racial justice as well as the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

The House Agriculture Committee will vote today on its piece of the package, a \$16.1 billion, [17-page measure](#) that also includes new aid for the food supply chain and rural hospitals as well as domestic and international food assistance. House Agriculture Chairman David Scott, D-Ga., and Senate Ag Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., worked together with the Biden administration in developing key provisions, sources say.

Under the measure, farmers who qualify as "socially disadvantaged" would be eligible for payments worth 120% of their indebtedness on direct or guaranteed Agriculture Department farm and storage facility loans. There is no spending cap on the provision.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Statement by Katharine Ferguson, USDA Chief of Staff, on the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act**

"We are pleased to see the introduction of the Emergency Relief for Farmers of Color Act yesterday in the Senate, a bill that will bring much-needed economic assistance during the pandemic and begin to advance equity for farmers of color. The bill is the culmination of hard work and collaboration among members of the Senate and House and new leadership at USDA who share a common purpose to end inequity in our food and agricultural systems. It's a bill crafted to address the immediate need for debt relief among those who have been marginalized and are hurting while also advancing long-term issues such as Heirs' Property, tackling the root causes of discrimination via an Equity Commission, and investing in building back a new generation of farmers of color. We are grateful for the leadership shown by Senators Booker, Warnock, Luján and Chairwoman Stabenow, as well as House Committee Chairmen Scott and Bishop who we expect to release a similar proposal today. We look forward to continuing to work with Congress to strengthen the American Rescue Plan so that it brings relief to those most in need."

[Source: USDA](#)

## House Ag Adds Democratic Members

The panel charged with addressing farm and food policy in the House of Representatives is adding four new Democrats and bringing one more member with previous experience back to the committee.

Reps. Bobby Rush, D-Ill., Ann Kuster, D-N.H., Ro Khanna, D-Calif., Lou Correa., D-Calif., and Del. Gregorio Sablan, a Democrat from the Northern Mariana Islands, are the newest members of the committee, which now has a full complement of Democrats and Republicans.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

## FACT SHEET: Update on USDA Activities to Contain the COVID-19 Pandemic

In January 2021, President Biden released the [National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness](#) (PDF, 24 MB). The plan is driven by science, data, and public health to improve the effectiveness of our nation's fight against COVID-19 and to restore trust, accountability and a sense of common purpose in our response to the pandemic.

The National Strategy provides a roadmap to guide America out of the worst public health crisis in a century. It is organized around seven goals:

1. Restore trust with the American people.
2. Mount a safe, effective, and comprehensive vaccination campaign.
3. Mitigate spread through expanding masking, testing, data, treatments, health care workforce, and clear public health standards.
4. Immediately expand emergency relief and exercise the Defense Production Act.
5. Safely reopen schools, businesses, and travel while protecting workers.
6. Protect those most at risk and advance equity, including across racial, ethnic and rural/urban lines.
7. Restore U.S. leadership globally and build better preparedness for future threats.

The plan calls on all parts of the federal government to contribute its resources—facilities, personnel, and expertise—to contain the pandemic. **The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responding** to the President's call to action. In addition to personnel, USDA is offering its facilities, cold chain infrastructure, public health experts, disaster response specialists, and footprint in rural areas and Tribal communities across the country. Here are some of the ways USDA is working alongside our federal partners to contain the pandemic and get our economy back on track.

[Read more from USDA.](#)

## USDA Extends General Signup for Conservation Reserve Program

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is extending the [Conservation Reserve Program](#) (CRP) General Signup period, which had previously been announced as ending on Feb. 12, 2021. USDA will continue to accept offers as it takes this opportunity for the incoming Administration to evaluate ways to increase enrollment. Under the previous Administration, incentives and rental payment rates were reduced resulting in an enrollment shortfall of over 4 million acres. The program, administered by USDA's Farm Service Agency (FSA), provides annual rental payments for 10 to 15 years for land devoted to conservation purposes, as well as other types of payments.

Before the General CRP signup period ends, producers will have the opportunity to adjust or resubmit their offers to take advantage of planned improvements to the program.

[Read more from USDA.](#)

### **Farm States Brace for Loss of Clout as House Redistricting Nears**

Major farm states are likely to lose more influence in the U.S. House because of population shifts that are expected to result in lost seats across the Midwest as well as in Pennsylvania and New York.

The results of the 2020 Census are not expected to be released before March, but analysts expect the states losing seats to include Illinois, **Ohio**, Michigan and Minnesota. California also could lose at least one House seat.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Phase One Deal Yields Little so Far in China Biotech Approvals**

There were high hopes after the "phase one" agreement was implemented last February that China would finally overhaul its opaque and sluggish approval process for new agricultural biotech traits, but that optimism has mostly turned to disappointment a year later, according to current and former government officials as well as industry representatives.

"They haven't made much of a change," said one U.S. government official, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the issue and the fact that U.S. and Chinese talks are still technically ongoing.

Low-level technical talks between the two countries continue, but it has been months since higher-level officials addressed significant implementation of China's biotech approval reforms, sources say.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **New Innovations Could Save Dilapidated Rural Bridges**

A new report recommends 20 ways to inexpensively replace or extend the life of deteriorating rural bridges across the country that are critical for moving agricultural commodities and farm equipment.

The [report](#), released by the Soy Transportation Coalition, says the fixes include installing all-steel piers, which have been found to provide "enhanced strength, resistance to corrosion, and lower maintenance costs compared to reinforced concrete," or using retired railroad flatcars to replace a short-span bridge. The coalition is made up of 13 state soybean boards, the American Soybean Association, and the United Soybean Board.

The report said flatcar bridges are "quick and easy" to install and require minimal maintenance, and that construction can be completed in six weeks.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Boozman: Climate Policy Threatens Farm Bill**

There are new signs of division on the Senate Agriculture Committee when it comes to climate change. The committee's top Republican, John Boozman, told members of the National Cotton Council Thursday that funding to address climate change could come out of existing farm bill programs.

"You'll hear that it's paid for, that it doesn't cost anything," he said of the Democratic climate plan. "The reason it doesn't cost anything is that ... the monies that they need to make it work will come out of the farm bill. And so something else will be displaced."

But: Ag Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow told reporters recently that she wants to put more money into conservation programs to promote climate-friendly practices but that she wants the funding to come out of separate climate legislation that Democrats plan to move later.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Direct Payments Down, But Still Historically High This Year**

Government farm payments are still likely to fall significantly this year, but the cliff won't be quite as stiff as it once looked like it would be.

In its latest farm income forecast, USDA estimates farmers will receive \$25.3 billion in government payments this year, which is about twice the amount (see USDA graphic) producers typically were receiving before the Trump administration began pouring money into the farm economy through the Market Facilitation Program. Last year, government payments hit \$46 billion.

The government aid is expected to include \$8 billion in funding to be distributed from the omnibus bill enacted in December. USDA also estimates farmers will get \$2.5 billion in additional Coronavirus Food Assistance Program payments and \$2.8 billion through the Paycheck Protection Program's forgivable loans.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **February Starts with Big Corn, Soy Exports to China**

China made big commitments to buy U.S. corn in the last full week of January, and the following week saw significant physical shipments of the grain to Chinese buyers, according to the latest USDA trade data.

The U.S. shipped 357,600 metric tons of corn to China from Jan. 29 through Feb. 4, helping to push total U.S. exports for the week to a marketing-year high of about 1.6 million tons. That was a 57% increase from the previous week.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Hemp Groups Eye Task Force to Develop Checkoff Proposal**

Two hemp industry groups are looking for about 20 people to serve on a task force that will develop a proposal for a checkoff program funding research, education and promotional activities for the crop.

Leaders from the National Industrial Hemp Council and the Hemp Industries Association say they want the task force to be geographically diverse and represent all facets of the industry, from farming to processing to CBD manufacturing. The group's work is expected to take about 18 months.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Union Wants Faster Vaccinations, Hazard Pay for Essential Food Workers**

The union that represents many essential workers in the food chain wants hazard pay and earlier COVID-19 vaccinations.

United Food and Commercial Workers Union President Marc Perrone says there have been nearly 400 grocery and meatpacker worker deaths and nearly 80-thousand workers infected or exposed to coronavirus. "Ninety-one percent of our members are concerned about the current state of the COVID-

19 pandemic. Fifty-seven percent of those workers are more concerned now than they were thirty to sixty days ago.”

Perrone criticized large retailers and government leaders for not doing enough to protect essential workers and says they need the vaccines sooner. “Federal, state and local (elected officials) must in fact prioritize essential workers and further delays are unacceptable. You know, we’re not saying that these workers need to be first, but they shouldn’t be last, either.”

[Read more from Brownfield Ag News.](#)