

Policy Updates and Issue News August 2023

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NATIONAL GRANGE
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American Values. Hometown Roots.
View from the Hill



Washington Overview

Congress is still in recess until September 11. When lawmakers return, several big-ticket items will be on their agenda. The elephant-in-the-room issue will be funding the federal government for a new fiscal year which begins October 1. The Senate has cleared all their government funding bills out of the Appropriations Committee and sent them to the Senate floor for action for the first time since 2018. The House, on the other hand, this summer gave up trying to pass all its appropriations bills. Several conservative House members are seeking deeper cuts in spending. If the House fails to pass its appropriations bills in September, Congress will be faced with passing a continuing resolution to fund the federal government at current spending levels for several months. Otherwise, the government shuts down. Numerous farm bill authorizations also expire September 30. There is no way a new farm bill can make its way through Congress in September. That means Congress will need to extend the current farm bill for a period. Additional pressing legislation will be vying for consideration in both chambers this fall as well. For many of these bills, fall could be their last opportunity to muster a vote. Next year is an election year for the President, the Senate and the House. Bipartisan legislation will have the best chance of passage. Partisan legislation might pass the Senate but not the House and vice versa.

Agriculture and Food

FFA and MANNRS Sign MOU

The National FFA and Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANNRS) have signed a memorandum of understanding to share basic ag literacy skills and expand early career awareness about agriculture for minority students as they move from elementary school to higher education. MANNERS has 70 university chapters across the country in 39 states. MANNERS aims to connect and recruit those students outside of traditional ag circles. There is a growing need to get more young people to think about roles in the food value chain as a farmer, rancher, scientist, or engineer.

Farmer to Farmer Education

Senators Lujan (D-NM) and Moran (R-KS) have introduced the Farmer to Farmer Education Act (S.2614) to leverage existing technical assistance to support farmer-led education networks in the upcoming farm bill. The Act would support resources farmers already provide to each other. According to the 2022 National Young Farmer survey, 84% of respondents learned to farm by working on a farm or ranch and 62% of respondents learned from a mentor or someone in their community.

Rural Veterinary Workforce Act

The National Grange along with most livestock, dairy, poultry, horse and veterinary organizations have signaled their strong support to the House for the Rural Veterinary Workforce Act (H.R. 4335). Cosponsored by Adrian Smith (R-3-NB) and John Larson (D-1-CT), the Act would maximize funding for the Veterinary Medicine Loan Repayment Program and exclude VMLRP awards from recipients' gross income for tax purposes. This move will help attract more veterinarians to fill a critical shortage in rural areas. A companion bill is expected to be introduced in the Senate.

Rural Energy for America Program

Representatives Spanberger (D-7-VA) and Valadao (R-22-CA) and Senator Smith (D-MN) have introduced the bipartisan, bicameral REAP Modernization Act to make it easier for farmers and small businesses to access the Rural Energy for America Program at USDA. The Act would increase the cost share for REAP grants and raise certain grant limits. It would also streamline the application process and increase REAP's technical assistance, outreach, and education.

Conservation / Environment

WOTUS Rule Revised to Comply with Court Ruling

The EPA and Corps of Engineers are amending their Waters of the United States (WOTUS) regulation under the Clean Water Act to comply with the May 25 *Sackett v. EPA* Supreme Court decision. Most importantly, the amended rule removes the significant nexus test from consideration when identifying tributaries and other waters as federally protected. The agencies plan to host listening sessions this fall to identify additional issues of concern.

Health Care

Huber Points to Rural Mental Health

National Grange President was featured in *Lancaster Farming* talking about a Southwest Rural Health Resource Center survey which indicated mental health and addiction are top of mind health care issues for rural residents. The opioid epidemic, the COVID pandemic and the lack of rural mental health resources all contributed to this crisis. Over 60% of rural counties have no psychiatrist. There are 20% fewer primary care doctors in rural counties than urban counties. The stigma surrounding mental health challenges in rural America is huge. The op ed stated the National Grange is supporting reauthorization of the Farm and Ranch Stress Network in the upcoming farm bill. The Grange, along with its partner Rural Minds, is also asking for funding to stand up a 24-hour rural crisis helpline staffed by trained and experienced professionals who come from rural communities or who are familiar with the farming and ranching culture.

National Agricultural Crisis Hotline Act

Representatives Caraveo (D-8-CO) and Gonzales (R-23-TX), and Senator Gillibrand D-NY) have introduced the bipartisan and bicameral Grange-supported National Agricultural Crisis Hotline Act. It would provide 24/7 real-time assistance by voice and mobile texting. National Grange partner Rural minds was quoted at the bill's introduction, "This life-saving resource will provide those in agriculture with 24/7 access to help from trained responders who can relate to the challenges facing farmers and ranchers, speak their language, and provide assistance specific to their state of residence."

Don't change Coverage for Phosphate-Lowering Therapies

The National Grange submitted comments to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) Administrator Brooks-LaSure regarding Medicare Part D end-stage renal disease coverage. The Grange argued that if CMS shifts oral-only medications, like phosphate binders, into the Medicare Part B end-stage renal disease payment bundle, patients who already have limited access to care, like those in rural areas, will experience new hardships receiving quality treatment.

Kidney PATIENT Act Introduced

Representatives Carter (R-1-GA), Kuster (D-2-NH), Miller (R-1-WV) and Sewell (D-1-AL) introduced the Kidney PATIENT Act that supports access to critical care and lifesaving oral medicines for the kidney disease prospective payment system. A proposal by CMS will threaten kidney disease patients' access to life-saving medications and increase costs for dialysis treatments. The Act would delay the CMS change until 2033, or until new intravenous therapies come to market.

Make Fall Vaccines Available ASAP

The National Grange filed letters to Director Cohen at the CDC and Administrator Califf at the FDA to request them to make the fall COVID vaccine available as soon as possible as we approach the fall and winter seasons when respiratory diseases are so severe. Flu, COVID, RSV, and Pneumococcal disease take a heavy toll on the 20% of Americans who live in rural areas. The officials were urged to approve these latest vaccines in time for the mid-September vaccine clinic sponsored by the New England Granges at the huge Eastern States Exposition (Big E) in West Springfield, MA.

Extend Affordable Connectivity Program

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) allows low income and disadvantaged communities to access internet service at low \$30 monthly rates. Over 20 million households are currently enrolled. However, ACP funds are expected to be depleted by mid-2024. A letter signed by 29 Democrats and 16 Republicans has been sent to the House leadership calling on Congress to extend funding for ACP. A group of Republican Senators is calling for similar action. National Grange is supportive of ACP in order to get broadband service to unserved communities.

More Rural Broadband Service Coming

USDA has announced the distribution of \$667 million for high-speed broadband through the fourth funding round of its ReConnect program. Funding will be provided through grants and loans to broadband companies undertaking rural projects in 22 states. The ReConnect Program is designed to reach the most rural, remote and underserved communities in the country.

Of Interest

Nutrition Labeling for Pet Food

Pet food, treats and supplements packaging could more closely resemble human food labels if regulations proposed by the Association of American Feed Control Officials and sought by the pet food industry are adopted. This will be the first major update in 40 years for pet food products.

Perspective

“The good Lord made us all out of iron. Then he turned up the heat to forge us into steel.” ~ Marie Osmond

“Those who cannot understand how to put their thoughts on ice should not enter into the heat of debate.” ~ Friederick Nietzsche

“When you can’t make them see the light, make them feel the heat.” ~ Ronald Reagan

“If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.” ~ Harry Truman

“It ain’t the heat, it’s the humidity.” ~ Yogi Berra