



NATIONAL GRANGE

OF THE ORDER OF PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY

American Values. Hometown Roots.

View from the Hill



POLICY UPDATES and ISSUE NEWS

MARCH 2021 WRAP-UP

WASHINGTON OVERVIEW

With major COVID-19 relief in the rear-view mirror, Congress and the Biden administration are turning their focus toward other major priorities, including infrastructure, and a slew of smaller miscellaneous bills.

Infrastructure

As part of the ‘recovery’ aspect of President Biden’s campaign promise to “Build Back Better” the White House and Congress are turning their focus to a massive infrastructure package. Currently, the contours and budget for an infrastructure bill remain unknown because the administration and Congressional Democrats are still in the process of drafting a proposal. However, general themes and a timeline for such a package can be predicted. Beyond traditional infrastructure investments in roads, bridges, and waterways, it is certain that any large infrastructure package would include significant investments in projects to address climate change such as increased support for electric vehicles, and the deployment of renewable energy resources. With regard to rural America, the Biden administration has hinted that investments in broadband could be included in a potential package. Importantly, Democrats have also hinted that they may include tax provisions in this bill in order to defray the high expected price tag. The timeline for this infrastructure bill is expected to consist of debates, hearings, and negotiations throughout the summer, culminating in a final vote in September of this year to coincide with other important annual votes surrounding the budget and debt ceiling.

Miscellaneous Priorities

While infrastructure is expected to be the major Presidential legislative priority for the next many months, Democrats also plan to advance bills addressing issues such as gun control, immigration, equal protection for the LGBT community, women’s rights, and most prominently voting rights and democracy reforms. The fate of these priorities varies greatly, with many likely to put moderate Democratic Senators into a tight position as the Democratic base calls for them to take whatever measures are necessary to ensure their passage, including reforming the legislative filibuster in the Senate.

THE RELIEF PACKAGE

In mid-March President Biden signed the long-expected American Rescue Plan, a \$1.9 trillion bill he proposed to Congress which is intended to address the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic downturn, with key provisions affecting rural America. In the bill, Democrats included \$22.7 billion in agriculture and nutrition assistance provisions, including \$3.6 billion in aid for the food supply chain and \$4 billion marked for assisting minority farmers in paying off USDA direct and guaranteed loans, a provision pushed by recently elected Senator Raphael Warnock (D-GA) who garnered crucial support from Georgia’s black agriculture community. Outside of agriculture, the bill also targeted significant sums towards rural broadband. For example, the new law created

an Emergency Connectivity Fund of \$7.2 billion to reimburse schools and libraries for providing free broadband service during the pandemic, a reality which has played out across rural America as schools and work have gone remote. Yet more, the \$220 billion which the bill allocated for state and local governments was changed at the last minute to allow funds to be spent “to make necessary investments in water, sewer, or broadband infrastructure” meaning that a state could use some funds to expand broadband access in rural America.

In selling the American Rescue Plan to the country, the Biden Administration has also placed an emphasis on how other provisions of the bill could help rural Americans. For example, in tweets following the passage of the bill, White House economic advisor Brian Deese, who was a lead writer of the bill, argued that changes to the Child Tax Credit under the bill would benefit roughly half of all children living in rural areas and that the expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit could benefit as many as 1 in 4 childless adults in rural areas. Time will tell if these policies achieve their intended goals for rural America, but the intended appeal to rural America from the Biden administration is clear.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

Continue Farmers to Families Food Box Program

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, the National Grange urged USDA to establish a food chain link directly between food producers and food consumers. The resulting Farmers to Families Food Box Program became a major source of food for those in need. Because the pandemic is not yet over, National Grange president Betsy Huber is asking Secretary Vilsack to continue the popular food supply program. Huber also suggested removing barriers to small producer participation and allowing the content of boxes to reflect local preference and local food availability.

Free Meals Extended

USDA will extend free meals to children nationwide when schools are out of session this summer through September 2021. The summer meals programs will allow parents and guardians to pick up meals for their children, including bulk pick-up to cover multiple days of feeding.

Bills Support Local Meat Processing

National Grange is supporting the bipartisan bicameral Strengthening Local Processing Act for technical assistance and cost-share programs to expand local consumer demand. Sponsors of the Act are Senators Thune (R-S.D.), Merkley (D-OR.), Collins (R-ME.), King (I-ME.), Rounds (R-S.D.), Smith (D-MN.), Casey (R-PA.), Cramer (R-N.D.) and Representatives Pingree (D-ME.), Fortenberry (R-NB.), and Küster (D-N.H.).

Ag Research Lagging Behind

Investment in research has enabled American agriculture to be the Breadbasket of the World for many decades. But that investment has not kept pace with the times. USDA funding increases have generally been less than half the rate of increase for other departments. The National Grange has joined a large contingent of agriculture and food groups, professional societies and land grant universities to encourage the Senate and House budget committees and appropriations committees as well as Secretary Vilsack to restore appropriate levels of research and development funding to USDA.

ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE CHANGE

Grange Welcomes EPA Administrator Regan

National Grange president Betsy Huber congratulated Michael Regan on his Senate confirmation as Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency. Huber noted Regan's previous working relationship with agriculture and the State Grange in North Carolina and said the Grange looked forward to working with him and the administration to advance environmental policies which benefit rural America.

WOTUS Wins in Court Again

A further clarification of the definition of Waters of the United States by the Navigable Waters Protection Rule issued in mid-2020 has again been upheld in court. An administrative stay by a district court judge in Colorado has been lifted by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Tenth circuit. With the stay lifted, the National Waters Protection Rule is now effective nationwide which is good news for farmers, ranchers and landowners.

The Many Sides of Climate Change

Clean energy, carbon sequestration and methane gas emissions are on the top tier of the Biden administration agenda. All agencies of the federal government have been charged to create a climate action plan. The first question in the discussion is always what are we going to do about climate change? The tougher questions follow; how are we going to do it? Are the goals realistic? What's the time frame to accomplish certain goals? Are we using U.S. data, not worldwide data, to set benchmarks and timelines? What will be the economic impact of certain climate actions? Are there health and well-being benefits to meeting certain goals and timelines? Will carbon markets selling carbon credits supplied by agricultural lands become a major force to capture carbon and move the needle on climate change?

HEALTH CARE

Rural Needs Vaccine Options

We need additional vaccine delivery options as rural and underserved communities struggle to immunize their populations according to National Grange president Huber in a letter to the research and development director at HHS. Government-backed innovation helped create an effective COVID vaccine in record time. Rural communities are in desperate need for more innovative vaccine methods of delivery, including an oral option, to facilitate more robust distribution methods.

Medicare Should Cover New Cancer Test

The National Grange and an enormous number of patient and health care organizations are voicing strong support for the bicameral, bipartisan Medicare Multi-Cancer Early Detection Screening Coverage Act. A groundbreaking new category of cancer screening can detect many deadly cancers in earlier stages through a simple blood draw before it spreads throughout the body. However, even when this new procedure is approved by FDA, it may take years to achieve Medicare coverage as a preventive procedure. This legislation, introduced by Senators Crapo (R-ID), Bennett (D-CO), Cardin (D-MD), and Representatives Sewell (D-AL), Arrington (R-TX), Ruiz (D-CA) and Hudson (R-NC), would authorize Medicare to cover patients' cost for the screening test when approved.

IMMIGRATION/AG WORKFORCE

Ag Labor Bill Clears House

The House has passed the Grange-supported Farm Workforce Modernization Act (H.R.1603) by a bipartisan vote of 247-174. Sponsored by Representatives Lofgren (D-CA) and Newhouse (R-WA), the Act allows 20,000 year-round worker visas per year, provides for these numbers to increase or decrease depending on demand, streamlines the H-2A application process, and helps farms renovate or build worker housing. Existing farmworkers in the country can get temporary legal status if they've worked in agriculture at least 180 days over the past two years. Farmworkers can also earn a green card by paying a fine and continuing to work in agriculture for an additional period of time.

Farmworker Fate Uncertain in Senate

As the ag workforce debate moves to the Senate, it's not yet clear what strategy positions Democrats and Republicans will take. Will a bipartisan vote be possible? Will Senate leadership allow a stand-alone vote on a farmworker bill or insist farmworker provisions be rolled into a larger comprehensive immigration package? Under either scenario, Agriculture will look to make improvements to some of the House-passed provisions.

MORE ON INFRASTRUCTURE

A massive infrastructure initiative is another of President Biden's priorities and discussions about a path forward are under way on Capitol Hill. Much like the immigration scenario in the Senate, members of Congress have differing views whether to attempt a massive comprehensive all-inclusive legislative infrastructure package or a piece-meal approach of several individual bills. Either way, the cost is expected to be in the trillions of dollars. The reasoning behind an infrastructure initiative is two-fold: 1) America's infrastructure is in dire need of repair and new build-out and, 2) such a project will serve as an economic recovery stimulus following the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Grange is a member of the Rebuild Rural Coalition whose mission is to ensure rural infrastructure is included in infrastructure legislation.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

During the COVID pandemic this past year, the United States discovered a large number of its citizens, particularly in rural areas, did not have broadband at all or broadband at speeds fast enough to allow households and small businesses to operate under lock-down pandemic conditions. In response, Congress and the Federal Communications Commission swiftly targeted over \$22 billion in new broadband funding to close the connectivity gap. Congress instructed the FCC to prioritize more accurate mapping efforts to determine areas without internet service. Communities and internet providers teamed to stand up mobile hotspots to give students access for online learning, homework and research. The National Grange has been beating the rural broadband-deficiency drum for over a decade and appreciates the heightened levels of awareness, commitment and funding targeted toward closing the rural digital divide.



2021 NATIONAL GRANGE *Virtual* LEGISLATIVE FLY-IN



Save the Date, Wednesday April 7, 2021

Speakers from Capitol Hill, the Biden Administration, issue coalitions, National Grange leadership staff & more.

Even though National Grange members aren't able to physically attend the Washington legislative fly-in this year, the issues Grangers need to address are flying around the Nation's Capital. A new administration is settling in to run our government. A new 117th Congress has been sworn and the legislative process is in full swing. The country is dealing with a historic viral pandemic. At the same time, businesses are struggling to return to some sort of economic normalcy. Your grassroots input to Congress and federal agencies has never been more critical.

Here's your chance to get the latest scoop on what's happening in Washington. Join the National Grange on Zoom the afternoon of Wednesday, April 7 for a virtual fly-in and hear the latest about the public policy issues that affect rural and small-town residents. Outstanding speakers will address these areas if interest and more:

- Updates from the Biden White House
- Emerging agendas on Capitol Hill
- Changes to agriculture and food policy
- Climate change and environmental initiatives
- Heightened attention to health care and rural access to medical attention
- Focus building on rural broadband expansion
- Infrastructure spells economic stimulus

REGISTER TODAY

PERPESPECTIVES

April is Grange Month. Heads of wheat have been part of the Grange insignia for 153 years. We thought it appropriate to focus on wheat this month.

- “ If you could understand a single grain of wheat you would die of wonder. ~ **Martin Luther** ”
- “ The time will come that gold will hold no comparison in value to a bushel of wheat. ~ **Brigham Young** ”
- “ As you get older, you find that often the wheat, disentangling itself from the chaff, comes out to meet you. ~ **Gwendolyn Brooks** ”
- “ We can grow good wheat and make good bread only if we understand that we do not live by bread alone. ~ **Michael Joseph Oakeshott** ”