



# NATIONAL GRANGE

## OF THE ORDER OF PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY

*American Values. Hometown Roots.*

### *View from the Hill*



## POLICY UPDATES and ISSUE NEWS

### DECEMBER 2021 WRAP-UP

#### WASHINGTON OVERVIEW

##### **Manchin Opposes Build Back Better Act**

Shortly following the end of the congressional session for 2021, on Saturday December 18, 2021, Senator Joe Manchin (D-WV), the most conservative Democratic Senator, made the surprising declaration that he would not vote for the Build Back Better Act. The \$1.75 trillion bill, which includes spending on climate and social programs as well as tax increases on corporations and high-income households, had been passed by the House of Representatives in November and had been stalled in the Senate while Democratic Senators negotiated over the specifics of the bill. Up until his announcement, Manchin had indicated that he was interested in passing the bill following negotiations which addressed his concerns over programs like the expanded Child Tax Credit and green energy subsidies. Following Manchin's announcement many Democrats in Congress and the administration issued tersely worded statements expressing their disappointment that the Senator was no longer willing to negotiate, but also hope that they may still be able to find a compromise on some provisions of the bill. As of writing, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) has indicated that he still intends to bring a vote on the Build Back Better Act to the floor in January, forcing Manchin to vote on the record in opposition to the proposal. Meanwhile, behind the scenes many Democratic Senators are seeking to work with Manchin on a pared down bill which includes only those provisions that he would be able to support. While this is the most significant headwinds the Build Back Better Act has faced so far, it still remains possible that some key Democratic priorities within the bill will be able to be passed.

##### **Congress Completes Housekeeping Before Winter Recess**

Before officially departing for winter recess, Congress was able to finally come to agreements which allowed key bills and appointments to move forward. In mid-December Senate Democrats and Republicans agreed to change the rules of the filibuster to allow for a simple majority of the chamber to raise the debt ceiling, which Democrats subsequently did, thereby allowing the government to avoid defaulting on its debt. As part of the deal, the National Defense Authorization Act, the bill which funds the armed forces, was also able to proceed and passed through an overwhelming bipartisan vote. Finally, just before Senators left town for the holidays, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) was able to force Republicans to relent on blocking many key appointments within the Biden administration.

#### AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

##### **Food Prices Continue to Surge**

Supermarket prices jumped 6.4 percent over the past year, marking the largest increase for a 12-month period since 2008. Grocery price increases are a major reason the Consumer Price Index is up 6.8 percent over the past

year, the largest increase since 1982. Food suppliers blame inflation for price hikes, but lawmakers wonder if they're padding the bill. Supermarket sales increased by 11 percent last year over 2019 and that trend has continued into 2021. Labor shortages, shifts and surges in consumer demand, and supply chain snarls have stressed production and distribution channels over the past 18 months. But some lawmakers accuse the food industry of excessive profit-taking during that time. Meat processors, in particular, are coming under scrutiny by the White House which says processors are increasing prices way above costs they are incurring due to inflation.

### **House Passes Bipartisan Beef Market Transparency Bills**

The House of Representatives has approved two pieces of legislation critical to providing producers greater transparency in the cattle markets. H.R. 5290 passed 418-9 and extends livestock mandatory price reporting through September 2022. The Cattle Contract Library Act tallied a vote of 411-13 and creates a market contract reference data base to assist producers with price discovery. A comprehensive compromise market transparency and price discovery bill in the Senate is cosponsored by Senators Fischer (R-NE), Tester(D-MT), Grassley (R-IA), and Wyden (D-OR) and has the support of the National Grange.

### **School Lunch Gets \$1.5 Billion for Supply Chain Challenges**

USDA is allocating \$1.5 billion to the school lunch program to help operators deal with supply chain issues that are driving up costs. This assistance is expected to reach up to 100,000 schools across all 50 states to purchase domestically produced fresh fruit, milk, cheese, frozen vegetables, and ground meat.

### **Funds to Address Ag Stress**

USDA will distribute \$25 million in grants to 50 state ag departments to support projects aimed to alleviate stress around finances, work, family, and other issues exacerbated by the pandemic. Programs include retreats, resettlement help targeted to Latino, Hispanic, Hmong and African workers, farmer-to-farmer networks, financial counseling and more.

## **AG WORKFORCE/IMMIGRATION**

### **Fewer Immigrant Workers Slow Economy**

Fewer immigrant workers are coming to fill jobs and the U.S. economy suffers. More than a million immigrant workers are missing from the current job market as America struggles with roughly 11 million open positions. Aside from agriculture, industries feeling acute worker shortages include food service, health care, trucking and warehousing.

## **CLIMATE CHANGE/CONSERVATION**

### **Technical Assistance and Cover Crop Incentives**

Senate Democrats have dramatically increased funding for farm conservation in their version of the Build Back Better spending package. The legislation authorizes an increase of \$21 billion for farm bill conservation programs and creates a new \$5 billion program to pay farmers to plant cover crops. Their package also extends authorization for the conservation programs through 2031. Under the 2018 farm bill, conservation program authorization is due to expire in 2023 in anticipation of a new farm bill being written.

## HEALTH CARE

### Medicare Part D Should Pay for Essential Immunizations

One of the best and most cost-effective ways to protect our nation's seniors is to ensure they are vaccinated against common infectious diseases. That's the message the National Grange carried to fifty members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee and House members of the Congressional Rural Caucus in mid-December. Congressmen were urged to cosponsor H.R. 1978, the bipartisan *Protecting Seniors Through Immunization Act of 2021*. The bill would make vaccines for shingles, pneumonia and several more diseases available at no cost to seniors under Medicare Part D the same as other essential vaccines are covered by Part B. The data tell us that the more seniors must pay, the less likely they are to get vaccinated.

### New Medicines to Treat Rare Diseases

There's good news that nearly 800 new innovative treatments are in the development stage to combat rare diseases. These diseases include rare cancers, genetic disorders, neurological disorders, blood disorders, and autoimmune issues. Roughly 30 million Americans are living with a rare disease.

## TELECOMMUNICATIONS

### Funds Delivery May Slow Broadband Progress

Rural America may have to wait longer for high-speed broadband. Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo says the majority of the \$65 billion for broadband deployment in the recently passed infrastructure package may not be distributed until 2023. Raimondo is waiting for the FCC to update its controversial broadband access maps by the middle of 2022. The Commerce plans to set up a process for states to apply for broadband money by May 2022. Fortunately, some rural broadband funding is already available from the FCC and USDA which will allow ongoing expansion of high-speed rural broadband connectivity in many areas. A high priority for the National Grange next year and the years following will be to ensure the congressional mandate is followed which is to serve the unserved first, the underserved second, then everyone else.

## PERSPECTIVES

- “ If more politicians in this country were thinking of the next generation instead of the next election, it might be better for the United States and the world. ~ **Former Congressman Claude Pepper** ”
- “ A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots. ~ **Marcus Garvey** ”
- “ It is the soldier, not the reporter, who has given us the freedom of the press. It is the soldier, not the poet, who has given us the freedom of speech. It is the soldier, not the campus organizer, who has given us the freedom to demonstrate. It is the soldier, who salutes the flag, who serves beneath the flag, and whose coffin is draped by the flag, who allows the protester to burn the flag. ~ **Father Dennis Edward O'Brien** ”