



NATIONAL GRANGE

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View from the Hill



POLICY UPDATES and ISSUE NEWS

FEBRUARY 2023 WRAP-UP

WASHINGTON OVERVIEW

Congress Gets to a Slow Start

Following a lengthy process to elect a Speaker for the new 218th Congress, the first few weeks of the new session have gotten off to a slow start. In the House, it took until early February for both parties to finalize their committee assignments, and subcommittee assignments have only just been determined. As well, many committees have only recently been able to hold their first hearings to organize the committee and begin working on legislative issues. In the Senate, committees were able to form earlier due to continued Democratic control of the chamber. As a result of this disparity in organizational quickness, Senate committees are further along in beginning their legislative work than committees in the House. For example, the Senate Agriculture committee has already hosted several hearings on the Farm Bill, while the House has only had one listening session so far.

Debt Limit is Top Issue

While work has begun to progress on a variety of legislative issues, the looming threat of a debt limit default is top of mind in Congress and the White House. The debt limit is a cap set by Congress on the amount of money which the federal government is authorized to borrow in order to meet ongoing fiscal obligations. It is important to note that the debt limit does not control future or new spending by the federal government, it only controls borrowing to meet existing spending authorized by Congress. Congress has never failed to raise the debt limit when necessary, and has done so 78 separate times since 1960 under Congresses and Presidencies of both parties. Should the Congress fail to raise the debt limit before the cap is hit, which is estimated to come sometime in the summer this year, then the federal government would default on its fiscal obligations, certainly causing serious economic turmoil.

House Republicans have made clear that they will not vote to raise the debt limit if Democrats in the Senate and White House don't agree to certain terms. The House Republican demands vary significantly depending on which member of Congress is asked, but all generally center around some amount of spending cuts or an agreement to not spend over a certain amount of money in the future. Some of these proposed cuts have caused turmoil within the House Republican Conference, such as proposed changes to nutrition assistance programs which House Agriculture Committee Chair GT Thompson (R-PA) has argued should not be considered in debt limit negotiations. Currently, Democrats have demanded that Republicans outline a specific set of demands before they are willing to begin negotiations surrounding a deal to pass a debt limit increase. Many Democrats have also argued that the debt limit should be raised without any conditions, pointing to recent debt limit increases which occurred under President Trump without any conditions as precedents. For the time being, neither side

looks likely to budge in its position, but a compromise must be found in order to avoid serious economic consequences.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

Expanding Agricultural Exports Act

Agricultural export market development and promotion programs have added an average of \$9.6 billion annually since 1977 to the value of U.S. farm exports. But these programs have not kept pace with foreign competition placing the U.S. at a competitive disadvantage. The bipartisan and bicameral Expanding Agricultural Exports Act would double the annual mandatory funding for foreign market promotion and development. Sponsors of the EAEA Act are Senators King (I-ME), Ernst (R-IA), Smith (D-MN), Grassley (R-IA), and Collins (R-ME), and Representatives Newhouse (R-WA-04), Costa (D-CA-21), Mann (R-KS-01), Panetta (D-CA-19), Hinson (R-IA-02), Schrier (D-WA-08), Finstad (R-MN-01), and Pingree (D-ME-01).

Cattle Pricing Reintroduced in 118th Congress

The bipartisan Cattle Price Discovery and Transparency Act has been reintroduced in the Senate by Fisher (R-NB), Tester (D-MT), Grassley (R-IA), and Wyden (D-OR) as original sponsors. The bill establishes minimum levels of fed cattle purchases made through pricing mechanisms such as negotiated cash, negotiated grid, stockyards, and other accepted trading systems. It also establishes a public library of marketing contracts, mandates boxed beef reporting, and requires packers to report the numbers of cattle to be delivered for the next 14 days. The intent is to create total transparency in cattle markets. Joining as cosponsors of the Act are Senators Ernst (R-IA), Braun (R-IN), Smith (D-MN), Smith (R-MS), Daines (R-MT), Cassidy (R-LA), Lujan (D-NM), Durbin (D-IL), Heinrich (D-NM), Warnock (D-GA), Blumenthal (D-CT), Gillibrand (D-NY), Lumis (R-WY), Hawley (R-MO), Brown (R-OH), Rounds (R-SD), Kennedy (R-LA), and Ricketts (R-NB). National Grange member policy supports the provisions of this legislation.

House Creates Special China Committee

House Speaker McCarthy has convened a special bipartisan panel to investigate Chinese investments in U.S. agriculture. Its charge is to create a report by the end of the year to highlight issues that need legislative solutions. A 2022 report by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission warned that China could gain further leverage over U.S. supply chains by purchasing agribusiness and land here.

End of Pandemic-Era SNAP Benefits

Emergency pandemic-era Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) special benefits ended this month. Work requirements to be eligible for normal SNAP benefits that had been paused during the pandemic are back. General work requirements are applicable to recipients ages 16-59 who must register for work in order to get benefits. There are exemptions for taking care of children or incapacitated persons as well as for physical or mental reasons. Able bodied adults without dependents (ABAWD) ages 18-49 must work 20 hours per week.

New Requirements for Healthy Food Label

The Food and Drug Administration is updating its requirements for the use of the term healthy on food labels for the first time since 1994. If food companies want to use the healthy claim, the product must abide by specific thresholds of total and saturated fat, cholesterol, and sodium plus contain nutrients like Vitamin A, calcium or iron.

CONSERVATION and ENVIRONMENT

Climate-Smart Funds Available to Producers

The USDA is releasing funding for agricultural producers and forest owners to participate in voluntary conservation programs and adopt climate-smart practices. The money, made available through the Inflation Reduction Act, will be allocated to programs administered by USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service. These include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP), Agriculture Conservation Easement Program (ACEP), and Regional Conservation Partnership Program (RCPP). NRCS accepts applications for its programs year-round. Funding is through a competitive process and will include an opportunity to address unmet demand from producers who have previously sought funding for climate-smart conservation programs.

HEALTH CARE

National Grange Survey Highlights Rural Cancer Disparities

Cancer is the second most common cause of death in the United States after heart disease. A new study by the National Grange with data analytics firm Xcenda finds that compared to urban areas, rural communities have overall higher rates of cancer incidence, late-stage diagnoses, and mortality than their urban counterparts. Unfortunately, the urban-rural disparity in cancer mortality has been widening over the past decade. The study reveals that people in rural areas are less likely to get preventive health screenings than those who live in cities and suburbs. Some of the reasons are a lower percentage of workers with jobs that offer health insurance, higher poverty rates, or the simple barrier of a lengthy drive to reach a health center that offers cancer screenings such as mammograms and colonoscopies. The Grange will use this data to urge rural citizen access to and Medicare coverage for new technologies such as multi-cancer early detection tests which can simultaneously screen for dozens of cancers with a simple blood draw.

Congress to Look at Middlemen and Drug Pricing

Insurance companies use middlemen known as Pharmacy Benefit Managers (PBMs) to decide what medicines people can get and how much people must pay for these medicines. These middlemen operate with little transparency and accountability. The top three PBMs, CVS Caremark, OptumRx, and Express Scripts control 80% of the entire prescription drug market. PBMs often bill health plans, employers and government health programs more than what they pay to the pharmacy for medicines and pocket the difference. PBMs may also require patients to pick up prescriptions at pharmacies the PBM owns or has another financial relationship with. Congress will try to add transparency and accountability to the PBM process. Senators Grassley (R-IA) and Cantwell (D-WA) have introduced S. 127, the Pharmacy Benefit Manager Transparency Act of 2023 and the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee has scheduled a hearing on the bill. The House has launched a bipartisan Patient Access Caucus to focus on patient access to health care and PBM involvement. The Grange has urged oversight of PBMs as one way to cheapen the price of prescription drugs.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

More Time Needed to Challenge Broadband Maps

The National Grange has asked the National Telecommunications and Information Agency (NTIA) to continue accepting challenges to its draft broadband coverage map released in mid-November. The agency only allowed

an eight-week challenge period to receive feedback from residents who were shown to have internet coverage on the map but in fact had no internet. Twenty-House members made similar requests. The NTIA has agreed to continue to receive challenge input on an unofficial basis.

OF INTEREST

FDA Can't Make Decisions On CBD in Animal Feed

The Food and Drug Administration is calling for a new regulatory pathway to allow the use of cannabidiol, or CBD, in dietary supplements and food additives for animals. The agency had previously concluded that “it is not apparent how CBD products could meet safety standards” for those products. FDA received an application in 2021 seeking approval for use of hempseed meal and cake in poultry feeds. Hulled seeds from industrial hemp, and protein powder and oil from these seeds, are allowed by FDA as ingredients in human foods, however. The agency is concerned that long term CBD use might pose risks to animals, and therefore, people could unknowingly be exposed to CBD through meat, milk and eggs from animals fed CBD.

PERSPECTIVE

- “ The way I see it, if you want a rainbow, you gotta put up with the rain. ~ **Dolly Parton** ”
- “ Into each life some rain must fall. Some days must be dark and dreary. ~ **Henry Wadsworth Longfellow** ”
- “ I always like walking in the rain, so no one can see me crying. ~ **Charlie Chaplin** ”
- “ Some people walk in the rain; others just get wet. ~ **Roger Miller** ”
- “ Rain is grace; rain is the sky descending to the earth; without rain, there would be no life. ~ **John Updike** ”