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## California's first groundwater rules rub against SGMA

San Luis Obispo (SLO) County has been restricting new groundwater wells in the Paso Robles subbasin for nearly a decade. Now county supervisors are hoping to go further by tacking on a carbon sequestration mandate for any new plantings.

The county is separately developing a revised groundwater sustainability plan (GSP) for the Salinas Valley basin—after the state rejected its initial plan and after agricultural leaders chastised the county for excluding farmers in the process.

The region has grown to dominate wine production outside of the North Coast region, where pricey real estate values have restricted expansion. Yet Paso Robles winegrape growers—who have also set high sustainability standards—have seen property prices skyrocket since the county approved the well ordinance in 2013, with the restrictions taking full effect three years later.

The county is not connected to state and federal water projects, and farmers have turned to a shallow aquifer when local reservoir levels drop in dry years. Rising competition over water resources with urban development in the region spurred county leaders to enact the planting ordinance restricting new groundwater wells.



A farmer pumps groundwater. (Photo: Department of Water Resources)

**The action created a divide in agriculture between the landowners with existing wells, who capitalized on land values that soared about 17% in the subsequent years, and those without, whose property values froze in place at less than half the worth of the nearby “vested” lands.**

Despite the ordinance, the region's vineyard managers and strawberry growers have propelled the county's agricultural economy above a billion dollars in annual revenues.

**With the ordinance set to expire next year, the county is proposing an ambitious update. It would extend an annual pumping allowance for new plantings from 5 to 25 acre-feet per year, which won over about a dozen property owners but left the larger agricultural community scratching their heads over the complex policy adjustment and eventually opposing it due to the various strings attached to the water giveaway.**

The board of supervisors have also been reeling from a rejection by the Department of Water Resources (DWR) in January, when the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA) regulator ruled the county's 1,100-page GSP was incomplete. According to DWR's report, the GSP lacked details on the plan's potential impacts to private wells if groundwater levels continue to drop. The county also failed to assess how groundwater depletion could hurt local rivers and creeks through subsurface connections.

In 2019 the county also drew the ire of the State Board of Food and Agriculture when drafting the plan. Farmers claimed the county made little effort to engage the agriculture community. In a letter to county supervisors, board chair Don Cameron charged that not including all stakeholders would violate one of the fundamental values of SGMA and that the GSP relied almost exclusively on groundwater pumping cutbacks.

**"Every agriculturalist who has addressed the board acknowledges demand reductions must be a part of the plan, but not the sole option," argued Cameron.**

He and the board also warned the approach could harm the "extraordinary agri-culinary tourism industry the county has built."

The supervisors "adamantly disagreed" with the board and defended their outreach efforts to stakeholders. An advisor to the county blamed agriculture for having "driven the bus over the cliff" by causing the groundwater overdrafting.

Supervisor Lynn Compton said this debate is simply election year politics. She surmised that farmers were not happy because "they're using the bulk of the water and they're going to be asked to cut back."

Yet other supervisors criticized the GSP as "frankly weak" for excluding irrigated agriculture and worried the "action has led to serious dysfunction."

**After DWR denied the plan this year, NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service stepped in to evaluate the connection between groundwater and streamflows and found the issue to be much more complicated than the revised plan accounts for. Raising more scrutiny over the GSP, Sierra Club opposed it for not incorporating the future impacts of climate change.**

Despite the contentious GSP process over the years, the SLO County Farm Bureau pushed for groundwater to be regulated entirely through SGMA, though it would accept an extension of the current iteration of the county ordinance.

"Land-use regulations like the planting ordinance are the wrong long-term approach," argued Brent Burchett, the farm bureau's executive director, in a letter to the SLO County Planning Commission.

The farm bureau views the GSP as a more equitable and appropriate means for achieving sustainability and praised the county for hiring a groundwater sustainability director and seizing on DWR grant funding to help implement the plan.

The proposed planting ordinance, on the other hand, would create onerous and inflexible financial burdens for small farmers, according to Burchett.

**“This new ordinance creates more problems than it solves,” said SLO County Farm Bureau President Sarah Kramer, during a commission hearing last month. “The planting ordinance will fundamentally change the relationship between the county and agriculture.”**

Kramer worried about being “stuck” with the provisions until they expire in 2045 and adapting to an “unprecedented” mandate on reducing greenhouse gas emissions and sequestering carbon.

“To our knowledge, this has never been done to farmers anywhere in California or the United States,” she said, with the farm bureau emphasizing that CDFA’s Healthy Soils Program and other climate-smart grant opportunities are all voluntary.

**The ordinance would create a 50-foot riparian setback, which Kramer believed would take thousands of acres of prime farmland out of production. She also criticized the “burdensome” reporting requirements and questioned the need for dust suppression plans.**



SLO County Farm Bureau President Sarah Kramer

The ordinance has also raised legal debates over preempting SGMA, making it “ripe for adjudication,” according to California Farm Bureau Senior Counsel Chris Scheuring.

The Grower-Shipper Association of Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties blasted the draft proposal for the mitigation measures and for installing a new regulatory structure for the county.

The county farm bureau did find some success in convincing the board of supervisors earlier this year to drop a provision that would have required a California Environmental Quality Act review for any new irrigated agricultural plantings, which could have added months of delays and potential litigation for each planting.

“Agriculture in California is extremely heavily regulated, and it feels to me like the county is now trying to pile on more,” said Steve Sinton, a fourth-generation rancher. “We have enough to deal with without some of the problems that are going to come with this new amendment.”

**He argued the proposal would restrict farmers from replanting a mature vineyard with nitrogen-fixing crops like peas to buy time for a spike in the nematode population to subside. Punishing them with two rounds of the lengthy permitting process for replanting vines later would instead incentivize growers to use more fumigants rather than replant at all, he reasoned.**

“The whole thing is just complicated and a mess,” fumed Sinton.

Patricia Wilmore, government affairs coordinator for the Paso Robles Wine Country Alliance, described the ordinance as putting lipstick on a pig.

“This is just a bad idea all the way around,” she said.

Since 2013 winegrape growers have been working with the county to address the need to balance the basin’s water table. According to Wilmore, the ordinance would undo that effort by putting the basin in greater danger of overdraft while risking the livelihood of the farmers and threatening water quality. She disputed assertions from supervisors that the draft ordinance would help small farmers, since the cost of compliance would be too prohibitive to replant. Small growers are already struggling with a costly new agricultural order the Central Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board approved last year.

Several planning commissioners, including chair Philip Henry, agreed with Wilmore.

**“This is an ordinance that doesn’t really achieve any public benefit, that overrides the environmental impacts,” said Henry. “There has been significant public opposition, notably from the agricultural community, but also environmental groups and agencies.”**

Commissioner Don Campbell joined a chorus of commissioners and stakeholders in calling the proposal premature. He raised alarms for the lack of support from the county’s Agricultural Liaison Advisory Board.

“Some of these [advisors] I have known for almost a lifetime,” said Campbell. “They’re the people I would really listen to when it comes to passing judgment on the situation.”

The commission rejected the proposal, and the board of supervisors is set to take up the issue on Dec. 6.

## **EJs dominate DPR forum on pesticide notifications**

Environmental justice advocates (EJs) came out in force to a series of workshops last week on the Newsom administration’s proposal to alert residents ahead of pesticide applications.

**The Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) organized in-person listening sessions in Tulare and Ventura Counties. Anti-pesticide groups demonstrated outside the buildings and brought a megaphone that overpowered the voices of growers in one hearing, according to reports from farm groups. The final workshop was held online, with dozens of activists delivering testimony—along with four members of the farming community.**

EJs and DPR Director Julie Henderson have argued the issue is a matter of the public’s right to know about pesticides being applied near communities. Yet EJs pushed for a more aggressive notification system, contending that anything short would continue to allow “sacrifice zones” for industrial agribusinesses.



DPR Director Julie Henderson spoke at a 2019 workshop on cancelling chlorpyrifos. (Photo: Brad Hooker)

“While I'm glad DPR is taking the first step towards implementing a pesticide notification system, there is a risk of the system being a failure unless serious flaws with the pilots are addressed before implementing a statewide notification system,” said Asha Sharma, a director at the Pesticide Action Network who has been leading the EJ effort on notifications.

DPR collaborated with county agricultural commissioners earlier this year to launch four pilot projects to examine various approaches to an alert system. EJs decried the pilots as offering false hope on notifications since the information was either too vague or too technical to comprehend.

**Sharma and several other advocates urged DPR to provide exact locations on maps for where the pesticides would be applied. Agricultural advocates have heavily opposed that request, fearing it would lead to activists trespassing on property to block applications and to publicizing home addresses.**

Jacob DeFant, a policy coordinator for the Agricultural Council of California, stressed that farmer addresses must remain private. He urged DPR to only include information on the field section location and that the notification grids are localized and informed by scientific parameters based on label requirements.

EJs, however, pushed for making the notification information accessible to the broad public through DPR's website, rather than requiring residents to sign up for the alerts. Agriculture commissioners have cautioned that this would allow activists far beyond the application site to stage demonstrations. During the annual meeting for the California Association of Pest Control Advisors last month, Riverside County Agricultural Commissioner Ruben Arroyo noted that his six-month pilot program gathered just 18 visitors from the area but had 400 hits from the Sacramento region. Farm groups often point to an earlier notification system pioneered by Monterey County, when 60% of the notifications went to people outside of California.

**EJs wanted those notices posted in Spanish, as well as the indigenous languages Mixtec, Zapotec and Triqui, and for the public to be able to sign up for email and text alerts without having to provide a name or address, since many undocumented immigrants are wary of sharing such information with the government.**

**EJs also want to expand the notification list beyond restricted use materials to include all synthetic pesticides as well as those listed on California's Proposition 65 cancer risk warning labels, those registered on the BeeWhere platform for protecting bee colonies, and any others of concern from scientists at environmental groups.**

Agricultural interests worried that expanding the list would raise more concerns for residents than DPR could answer and cautioned that any notification system must be accompanied by a rigorous effort to educate residents on the many steps the state already takes to ensure pesticide safety in California.

**Taylor Roschen, a policy advocate for the California Farm Bureau, added that limiting the notifications to restricted materials would make the system more efficient, since those products—which DPR reviews for safety and educated and licensed professionals apply—already exist within DPR's system and that information can be expeditiously translated into notifications.**

EJs reiterated calls for notices to be 72-hours ahead of applications, rather than agriculture's proposed 24 hours. The pilot programs tested notification times ranging from 7 to 36 hours ahead of time.



Roschen found leeway with DPR in wanting to avoid forcing farmers to strictly adhere to a timeline. She said that would create “punitive obligations” and leave farmers with little flexibility to adapt to sudden pest pressures or weather events. Farmers would have to submit multiple notices, leading to over-notification and user apathy, while taxing the limited resources that commissioners maintain for core functions like inspections and enforcement, she argued.

Sharma and her colleagues also stressed the need for an environmental justice advisory committee to guide the development of the system. This borrows from the approach of the Air Resources Board with its Environmental Justice Advisory Committee and various local steering committees for AB 617 incentives programs.



Asha Sharma, Pesticide Action Network

Attempting to counter some of the rhetoric from the EJ community was Tracy Miller, a crop consultant of 24 years and pest control advisor (PCA).

“The ag community, the growers are not trying to poison anybody,” assured Miller. “We are not living in hiding. We are not acting like wolves, as we’ve been accused of.”

He argued the public has made assumptions about the causes of illnesses like cancer and asthma.

**“We need to be sure that we have the facts,” he said. “If agricultural pesticides are the cause, then people like myself should be really sick and people that I know should be really sick. But that’s not the case.”**

Like Miller, Enrico Ferro has been a PCA and farmer for a quarter century and never been sickened by pesticide applications, nor has anyone he works with.

“These are people that were spraying pesticides for 50 years,” said Ferro. “A lot of these chemicals, you have to understand, are no more dangerous than what you have in your own homes, in your own garages.”

He was not worried about the residential use of herbicides on lawns but emphasized that farmers are reporting to DPR on the materials they apply.

The department and the consultants hired to facilitate the discussion took a stronger approach to limiting bad behavior after frustrations mounted in the agriculture community last summer during discussions that devolved into shouting and personal attacks. But the conversation quickly grew heated when DPR allotted the remainder of the session to open dialogue.

Ferro stepped in to frame the issue as a divide between the 2% of California’s population that works in agriculture and the rest of the state.

**“The only reason that so few people can provide food for so many is because we have things like pesticides and herbicides,” said Ferro. “We can’t produce the amount of food needed without them, unless at least 40 to 50% of you are going to get back out in the field to grow things organically.”**

He also reminded commenters that the activities of structural pesticide applicators will not fall under the pesticide notification requirements.

**“Your neighbor can get their house tented. Who knows what they're pumping in there, and you're not going to be able to see that,” he said. “I don't know why agriculture is being demonized to this extent.”**

That prompted one advocate to interject that “we’re crazy but not stupid” and another to take offense with Ferro’s comments, arguing that Mexicans and Latinos are “held hostage by the farming community.”

Catherine Dodd, a registered nurse representing Sonoma Safe Ag Safe Schools, told Ferro that communities today face a “chemical soup” of mixed pesticides. Dodd blamed her lymphoma on using the herbicide Roundup for several years.

“Respect the science,” she said, adding: “I'm grateful that we're looking at converting more farmland and investing in organic.”

**Roger Isom, president and CEO of the Western Agricultural Processors Association, attended the hearing in Oroquieta and told *Agri-Pulse* it was mostly calm but none of the EJ activists stuck to the three-minute comment window and one started yelling at a grower. One EJ member blamed his diabetes on pesticides, according to Isom.**

“It just wasn't conducive to a typical workshop where people can comment from either side and express their concerns,” he said. “I look for the day when we can have an intelligent, rational discussion on the topic. I don't know that that's going to happen.”

Isom was also frustrated that DPR did not release more details on the results of the pilot projects. He believed that was because the majority of people who signed up were likely from outside the counties.

Director Henderson monitored the workshops but kept her comments brief during the discussions.

**“We value your feedback. We hear you. Notification is important,” said Henderson. “And we will endeavor to deliver this system as quickly as we can.”**

Researchers at the UC Davis Center for Regional Change, which have gathered feedback throughout the year from workshops as well as individual meetings with stakeholders and emailed comments, will publish their findings early next year. DPR plans to draft a regulation in 2023 to implement in 2024, with more public hearings to come.

## **Dept. of Pesticide Regulation targets 1,3-D with new restrictions**

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation released a draft regulation on Tuesday to further restrict use of the fumigant 1,3-D, known by the brand name Telone.

1,3-D is a pre-plant fumigant used to control insects, nematodes, and other organisms in the soil that threaten a variety of crops including nut trees, berries, sweet potatoes, and grapes. It is commonly injected into the soil or applied through drip irrigation.

DPR released a draft regulation to further restrict the use of 1,3-D, following brief spikes in air monitor readings last year. The measures include tarping, deeper injections and expanded buffer zones.

**The proposed regulations would strengthen restrictions on use and significantly reduce potential residential and non-occupational bystander exposure to one of the most highly used agricultural pesticides in California, 1,3-D. The pesticide 1,3-D has been linked to potential acute and cancer health effects at certain levels of exposure, according to DPR.**

“Reducing human health risks from 1,3-D exposure is a priority for the state,” said DPR Director, Julie Henderson. “Taking action to strengthen restrictions on the use of 1,3-D to lower those risks is core to our mission of protecting human health and the environment.”

DPR’s proposed regulations require the use of totally impermeable film (TIF) tarpaulins or alternate mitigation measures that provide a comparable degree of protection – such as deeper soil-injection

The department conducted a pilot project in 2020–21 with pesticide applicators and local county agricultural commissioners to help develop alternative mitigation measures that better protect public health and additionally provide growers with compliance options that satisfy DPR’s strict regulatory requirements. DPR conducted the pilot project in regions where communities requested localized studies as part of their AB 617 Community Emissions Reduction program.

**The proposed regulations would expand setbacks from occupied structures, limit application rates, acreage, and allowed application methods, and include more stringent use requirements between November to February when weather conditions can create higher air concentrations following an application. The regulations also propose requirements for lower-emission application methods for tree and vine applications, which have the highest application rates for 1,3-D.**

DPR says the proposed regulations will address both potential cancer and acute health risks to non-occupational and residential bystanders from 1,3-D use, based on a health-protective regulatory target established last year after consultation with state and local agencies. In addition to these actions, DPR is currently working on separate regulations to address risks to workers from potential exposure to 1,3-D.

The mitigation measures proposed in the regulations are more health-protective than the current township cap program that limits 1,3-D use in the state.

DPR is accepting public comment on the regulations between Nov. 18 and Jan. 18 at 5 p.m. Comments can be submitted via U.S. mail or via email to [dpr22005@cdpr.ca.gov](mailto:dpr22005@cdpr.ca.gov), or by FAX at (916) 324-1491. Find more information on the 1,3-D regulations on DPR’s website, including information on a public hearing scheduled for Jan. 18.

## **DPR initiates licensing action against TriCal, raising broader questions about the future of fumigation**

The California Department of Pesticide Regulation (DPR) announced that it is initiating a licensing action against TriCal, a company that provides agricultural pesticide-application services to farms throughout Central and Northern California. The agency said the action is based on investigations and enforcement actions undertaken by several County Agricultural Commissioners, District Attorneys and the United States Environmental Protection Agency’s Region 9.



No action has been taken yet. The public announcement is the start of the process to determine what final action will be taken, according to a DPR spokesperson. In at least one previous case, a final decision was not announced until more than 17 months after the initial announcement.

In making the announcement, DPR cited numerous violations that “resulted in serious illness and injury and dozens of other violations,” including the following three accidents in three years.

- In October 2020, 20 residential bystanders and three members of the Salinas Fire Department experienced symptoms of pesticide exposure from a TriCal misapplication.
- In October 2019, 39 fieldworkers in Monterey County were exposed to 1,3-D and chloropicrin due to TriCal’s misapplication. 32 fieldworkers experienced symptoms of pesticide exposure and three people sought medical care for their symptoms.
- In October 2018 in Monterey County, TriCal misapplied a product containing 1,3-D and chloropicrin and, as a result, 13 residential bystanders experienced symptoms of pesticide exposure.

In addition, the agency said TriCal’s San Benito headquarters, and Santa Maria and Ventura branches have “significant violation histories dating back nine years.” These past violations include a combined 40 incidents – 4 of which were “priority episodes” in Butte, Fresno and Santa Cruz counties. Priority episodes are incidents involving serious illness or injury, or an episode involving five or more people.

To address these violations, TriCal has paid over \$125,000 in administrative civil penalties to County Agricultural Commissioners and a \$44,275 fine to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

TriCal’s Director of Marketing Jena Francis said the company was made aware of this most recent action from the California Department of Pesticide Regulation and was looking into it.

“TriCal is committed to the safety of people and the environment while abiding by the national, state, and county-specific rules for the safe use of pesticides to manage crop-destroying soil pests and pathogens. California has the strictest agriculture regulations in the world. TriCal prioritizes following the legally required steps necessary to protect workers, communities and out environment.”

She also noted that TriCal is a family-owned company offering valuable soil and crop health products and services to farmers in California since 1961. Hollister-based TriCal is one of the largest businesses in California to perform field fumigations, primarily using 1,3-D and chloropicrin. Fumigation involves injecting gaseous fumigant pesticides into soil to kill destructive organisms before planting.

The fumigant is commonly used on almonds, walnuts, grapevines, strawberries, sweet potatoes, carrots and tree fruit and has “no viable commercial-scale alternatives,” according to DPR. The agency also noted that the application of these pesticides is subject to a comprehensive set of use restrictions designed to protect public health.

But the timing of the announcement – after a series of contentious public hearings on a pesticide application alert system last week - and other DPR announcements on Tuesday that could further tighten restrictions on 1,3-D, raised questions in the agricultural community as to whether this was part of a broader DPR strategy to go “Fumigant free” as some environmental groups have long requested for both conventional and organic treatments.

## Thompson wants farm bill ‘on time’ and bipartisan

Rep. Glenn Thompson, who’s set to chair the House Agriculture Committee under GOP control of the chamber, plans to hit the ground running with farm bill hearings next year with a goal of having the legislation out of the House by July.



Rep. Glenn Thompson, R-Pa.

Thompson also says there are no “pre-drawn conclusions” that Republicans will try to use the measure to cut nutrition assistance programs.

**“We just need the farm bill to be done on time and in an effective manner,” the Pennsylvania Republican said in an interview off the House chamber as lawmakers returned for their lame duck session.**

“The best bills, the ones that pass and last and are not repealed, are the ones here that are done in a bipartisan manner. ... That’s my goal,” he said.

**Republicans were on the cusp Tuesday of winning control of the House, having secured 217 of the 218 seats needed for a majority in the chamber, according to The Associated Press. Republicans also were leading as the counting continued in three California races and another in Colorado.**

Even if the GOP were to win all of those races, their majority would still be razor-thin, which means that a handful of hard-line conservatives or moderates could easily block passage of bills.

With a margin that tight, a couple of ill-timed illnesses, resignations or deaths in the majority party could prevent a partisan bill from going forward, too.

**Republicans would have the smallest margin a majority party has had for passing a farm bill, since the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress in 2001-2002, when the GOP majority had as few as 219 members.**

Farm bills failed on the House floor in 2013 and again in 2018 because of revolts by Democrats over SNAP cuts combined with divisions among Republicans in the case of the 2018 measure.

**In both cases, the SNAP cuts didn’t make it past the Senate Agriculture Committee, and they would have little chance of getting by that panel in 2023 or 2024, either, since Debbie Stabenow is in line to remain the committee chair.**

Since passage of the 2018 bill, SNAP has ballooned in cost, both because of pandemic-related increases in benefits and an update to the formula known as the Thrifty Food Plan that is used to determine benefit levels. The update was authorized by that law as a result of Stabenow’s influence.

A senior Republican on the House Ag Committee, Austin Scott of Georgia, tells *Agri-Pulse* the narrow margins in the House in the next Congress will likely rule out making large changes in policy, including to nutrition programs.

**“It means that we have to do a lot of small things and probably don't end up with any big changes,” Scott said.**

As for SNAP, “I don't think you can get a bill out of the House that has significant changes to nutrition,” he said. “I do not think that you will see a significant reduction in the total amount of dollars going into the food benefit.”

**Scott would like to see a discussion about restrictions on the use of SNAP for unhealthy foods. In the past, however, that idea has run into opposition from nutrition groups and the food industry.**



*Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga.*

Meanwhile, Thompson said the committee needed to look at increasing the reference prices that trigger payments under commodity programs for row crops. The American Farm Bureau Federation threw its support behind increasing reference prices, although it's not clear how that would be funded.

**“Reference prices are irrelevant with this record high inflation,” Thompson said, referring to soaring input costs that cut into farm margins this year. “It’s not how much you bring in or what you get paid, it’s what you’re left with at the end of the day. That needs to have some consideration going forward.”**

Thompson indicated that the farm bill hearing process could start informally with an event at the Pennsylvania Farm Show in Harrisburg, Pa., on Jan. 7. The committee won't be formally organized until later.

“That would be a great way to kick off a road show, and as I think most people know, that's only about two, two and a half hours north of here by vehicle,” Thompson said of Harrisburg. Thompson said he's notifying both members of the committee and lawmakers who may want to get in on it.

**Thompson would like to move the farm bill in the House by July, ahead of the long August recess. Programs in the 2023 farm bill start expiring Sept. 30, although commodity programs remain in effect for the commodity marketing year, and the Inflation Reduction Act enacted in August extended authority for conservation programs through fiscal 2031.**

The committee has “got to get started on these listening sessions and put the pedal to the metal on the hearings as well,” Thompson said.

Thompson has already laid the groundwork for providing some oversight of USDA, although he was not clear what his timetable will be.

In September, the Ag Committee Republicans sent a letter to Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack demanding documents behind several administration actions, including the use of the Commodity Credit Corp. to fund climate-smart commodity projects.

“We remain concerned that a variety of USDA's recent and pending actions rely on specious statutory interpretation to achieve political goals well beyond congressional intent. From

repeated abuses of the Commodity Credit Corporation Charter Act (Charter Act) to controversial livestock and poultry marketing reforms, the potential effects of these actions are far-reaching and of enormous economic significance to our nation's farmers, ranchers, foresters, and consumers," the letter says.

The \$3.5 billion earmarked for the Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities project "unilaterally siphoned away from legitimate uses under the Charter Act such as addressing immediate market disruptions currently facing America's producers," the letter said.

## Climate conference in Egypt elevates ag issues

Agriculture has played a prominent role at the United Nations climate conference, where a broad range of companies, groups and governments have been discussing issues ranging from reparations for climate damage to the ways livestock contribute to and could mitigate the problem.

For the USDA, it was an opportunity to showcase \$368 billion in climate spending in the Inflation Reduction Act, including about \$20 billion in ag-specific funding, as well as the department's Partnerships for Climate-Smart Commodities program.

USDA said Saturday it had increased spending under the climate-smart program by \$300 million, to \$3.1 million thus far, by adding about 65 smaller projects to the 70 already funded.

**"There's a recognition that agriculture — in the United States for sure, but generally across the board — is really beginning ... to take this issue in a very serious way, and taking steps and investing resources, both private and public, to figure out precisely how best to approach being climate-smart," Ag Secretary Tom Vilsack told reporters.**

With the Conference of the Parties (COP 27) scheduled to continue until Sunday, Vilsack said, "We have to wait and see how these negotiations ultimately conclude. But I am very confident that we are headed (to) a place where agriculture is going to be more than a line or a sentence in a very long document."

Ernie Shea, president of the nonprofit Solutions from the Land, was in Egypt with about a dozen SfL members who led panels and spoke to participants, bringing a farmer-focused message.

**"We were there to remind the world that the agriculture sector currently can achieve food security, nutrition goals, climate goals, biodiversity goals and water quality goals" if farmers are at the center of the discussions, said Shea, who has been attending COPs since 2009. "So that's kind of our script over and over, and it's taking root, which is really encouraging."**

Shea, however, said the COP had been "sidetracked" by discussions about climate reparations — that is, whether developed countries should pay developing countries for damages from climate change, including the harm to crop production from droughts and extreme weather.



*Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack speaks about the Aim for Climate Initiative at the COP27 U.N. Climate Summit, in Sharm el-Sheikh, Egypt, Friday, Nov. 11, 2022. (AP Photo/Thomas Hartwell)*

**“This has to be a bigger conversation than just loss and damage, a bigger conversation than who's going to pay for all that loss and damage and that, if properly enabled with the right policy, markets, partnerships, research all those things together, the ag sector can contribute in a very significant way,” Shea said.**

Developing countries succeeded in getting the loss and damage issue on the agenda for the COP, but there is no consensus on how to move forward. President Joe Biden has pledged \$11.4 billion for poorer nations, both for cleaner energy and climate adaptation. So far, the U.S. has come up with just \$1 billion.

Representatives from Solutions from the Land conveyed the message that “there is no silver bullet” in ag to address climate change. At COP, SfL met with other farmers at the conference every morning and encouraged them “to advocate for all forms, sizes and methods of food production.”

SfL also emphasized “the critical role of livestock in the global food system,” according to their website.

A report released Tuesday slammed 15 multinational meat and dairy companies for their alleged lack of action on climate change.

“The methane emissions of the big meat and dairy companies rival those of nation states, yet they hide their colossal climate footprint behind a veneer of greenwash and net zero targets,” said Shefali Sharma, European Director of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy. “These companies won’t do what is needed voluntarily — governments must set rules to regulate their emissions and support farmers to transition away from industrial agriculture.”

Shea, however, said livestock can be part of the solution, particularly when one considers the importance of nutrition throughout the developing world.

**“Animals with proper sustainable grazing can be managing rangelands in a way that improves the health of the grasses, the diversity of the grass of forages, and produces a production platform that takes a nonedible plant material and turns it into a high-quality protein that people can eat,” Shea said.**

At the same time, properly managed grazing system have the potential to act as a powerful carbon sink, he said.

Shea said he was encouraged by the increase at COP27 in representatives from the animal ag industry, including the North American Meat Institute and U.S. Dairy Export Council.

Eric Mittenenthal, chief strategy officer at NAMI, said the group attended COP for the first time to emphasize what the industry is doing to address climate change as well as the nutritional benefits of meat.

**“We wanted to make sure that the commitments or the progress that we're making gets recognized in those discussions, so that animal protein can be a positive solution for healthy people in a healthy planet,” he said.**



*Ernie Shea, Solutions from the Land*



Mittenthal also disputed the characterization of industry progress as summarized in the IATP report, which said most of the companies examined are failing to track their supply chain, or Scope 3, GHG emissions.

In recent data collected by NAMI, the group found that “more than 80% of the facilities covered in our data collection, which includes all 15 of our largest companies, do track and have goals for their Scope 3 emissions,” Mittenthal said.

For his part, Vilsack said, as he has in the past, that he does not believe people will have to eat less meat to achieve the U.S. goals of reducing methane by 30% below 2020 levels by 2030.

**“Let's remind everyone that methane production isn't just agriculture,” he said Monday. “It is a lot of what goes on in our world today from industry, as well as food waste that ends up in landfills, that creates a significant amount of methane.”**

He also brought up protein, saying that with a growing world population, “there’s going to be a need, frankly, for a variety of ways in which that protein will be provided to people, livestock being one way, but not the only way. And I think we're going to continue to see continued efforts to make the livestock portion more sustainable, and look at other ways to produce the necessary protein to make sure that the hungry world gets fed.”

The latest EPA report on greenhouse gases and sinks found that in 2020, agriculture contributed about 10% of U.S. GHG emissions. The sector’s methane emissions, which have increased since 1990, made up about 42% of that 10%.

Enteric fermentation from ruminants accounted for about 3.3% of total U.S. emissions, according to EPA.

## **Fertilizer industry looking forward to boom years for potash**

Prices for potassium chloride, the most common form of potash fertilizer, dipped in the third quarter, but global demand is expected to climb in the coming years amid supply shortages, which will keep prices strong as companies around the globe invest in new production capacity.

Investors and analysts were taken aback by recent sharp price declines, but that hasn’t diminished the optimism by companies like Nutrien that are moving forward with expansion plans. While demand faltered in North and South America this summer, it's expected to come roaring back as global supplies remain constricted over the next few years, says Kwadjo Ahodo, a London-based senior research analyst for S&P Commodity Insights.

It's a perspective shared by Nutrien CEO Ken Seitz.

**“The long-term fundamentals for our business remain very strong and the challenge of feeding a growing world has not abated,” Seitz said in an explanation of the company’s third quarter earnings report. “In fact, over this past quarter, we have seen further pressure on global food supplies that will need to be addressed for several growing seasons.”**



*Ken Seitz, Nutrien*

Nutrien is planning to bring new capacity online gradually next year to produce millions more tons of potash in Canada. Across the Atlantic, Anglo American is scheduled to begin producing an additional 10-13 million tons annually by 2025 in the UK, while Russia's Uralkali is planning a 2-million-ton expansion by 2025.

Those are just some of the many expansion projects in the works now, says Ahodo.

**Back in April 2021, before the U.S. and European Union hit Belarus potash with sanctions, the freight on board price at New Orleans for potash was about \$250 per ton, according to S&P data. By April of this year, that average was \$900 per ton, after farmers in the U.S. and Brazil rushed to secure supplies amid dueling concerns over the Belarus sanctions and the outbreak of war in Ukraine.**

U.S. sanctions on Belarussian potash – including on two major state-owned companies that export about 13 million tons of the fertilizer per year – are meant to punish the Alyaksandr Lukashenka regime for a fraudulent election, migrant smuggling into the EU, and its forcing of an airplane to land in order to arrest a dissident. Those sanctions took effect in April, a month after Lithuania blocked Belarus from using its port in Klaipeda for potash exports. Belarus is the third largest potash producer in the world behind Canada and Russia.

Russia began restricting its fertilizer exports at about the same time, and global demand – especially in Brazil – shot up. Brazilian imports in the first few months of this year were 37% higher than normal, and the price for potash spiked above \$1,000 per ton, said Seitz.

Months later, stocks were abnormally high in Brazil, and U.S. farmers were holding off on purchases, waiting for prices to go down.

And prices did drop sharply in the third quarter in a situation that some call demand destruction, raising speculation as to whether companies like Nutrien should continue with expansion plans.

But U.S. demand is picking up as prices fall and Brazil burns through its stocks, says Ahodo, pushing global demand back toward a more stable rate of increase that he expects to play out over the next several years.

**“In North America, inventories are coming down now,” said Seitz, “In fact, we are starting to see movement with Midwest pricing at about \$640 per ton. Now we’re going to see replenishment of those inventories.”**

But prices might not drop further as transportation issues in the U.S. threaten supplies. There is still the potential for a railroad strike as two unions continue to negotiate with the carriers and low water levels on the Mississippi River complicate matters further.

**“Cargoes are going up about a quarter loaded on barges,” Corey Rosenbusch, president and CEO of The Fertilizer Institute, told *Agri-Pulse*. “A lot of the docks where fertilizer is transloaded into terminals are off the main river, and access to those docks is a challenge.”**

U.S. potash prices, Seitz said, “have been supported by restricted barge movements and a strong start to the fall application season. With respect to our decision to increase potash volumes, I would say that our view has not changed. We had a lull in demand in the third quarter, but the backdrop of ag fundamentals remains strong.”

Those fundamentals are especially strong in Brazil, which is producing more corn than ever as farmers continue to convert more land into production.

**Brazil's National Supply Co. is now predicting a record-breaking corn harvest for the 2022-23 marketing year. The country is expected to produce 5 billion bushels from all three of its crops. And still, global stocks are expected to remain tight in 2023 for the sixth consecutive year, said Seitz.**

“Crop futures moved higher in recent weeks and are indicative of multi-year strength in market fundamentals, with corn futures trading above \$5 per bushel out to December 2025,” he said. That’s an “incentive for growers to increase acreage and push to maximize yields.”

So Nutrien is going forward with its production expansion next year and intends to ramp up production in the following years as well, said Pedro Farah, the company’s CFO and executive vice president.

While Nutrien, Anglo American and Uralkali will all be adding to global supplies, there will still be a significant deficit until at least 2025, said Ahodo, who spoke to *Agri-Pulse* on the sidelines of a convention held in Houston last week by The Fertilizer Institute.

**Global supply is only expected to reach about 64 million tons this year, about 7 million tons short of demand. Supply, Ahodo said, is expected to reach about 67 million tons in 2023, but demand is also expected to rise, topping out at about 71 million tons.**

Almost all of that gap between supply and demand is due to the obstacles preventing exports from Belarus.

And that prediction takes into account the ability of Belarus to regain its access to the world market. Belarus is already partially making up for its inability to export through Lithuania by shipping more through Russia, which is building a new dry bulk terminal to handle those Belarusian supplies.

Ahodo said he expects Belarus to be exporting at a normal pace by 2026, but until then there will be a market deficit.

## **The avian flu outbreak that won't go away**

The outbreak of avian flu that drove poultry and egg prices sky high this year has carried into the fall as the virus continues to spread through wild birds, a sharp contrast to what happened during the last major attack of the virus seven years ago.

Preliminary data show there have been more occurrences this year of what scientists call “spillover events,” which is where the virus that causes highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) spreads from wild birds to domestic flocks, said Jeffrey Sullivan, a biologist at the U.S. Geological Survey's Eastern Ecological Science Center in Maryland.

And the “outbreak appears to have persisted in the wild bird population longer than we have seen previously,” he said.

**The 2014-15 outbreak was mostly confined to spring migration, whereas this year, the virus picked up again during the fall migration period after new cases slowed somewhat this summer. In addition, the 2014-15 outbreak affected only 21 states, while 46 states reported positive cases this year.**

“One of the unfortunate things about this virus returning in the fall rather than being confined to the spring, is we now have to accept the reality that this is an any time of year issue,” said Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Mike Naig.

The current H5N1 strain of the virus, which has hit Iowa particularly hard, was first detected in the United States in January.

**As of last week, 618 flocks with 50.32 million birds were confirmed to be infected. Of these, 264 were commercial and 354 were backyard flocks, according to USDA’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service. In Iowa alone, flocks totaling nearly 15.5 million birds — 30% of the total number of birds affected in the United States — have been depopulated.**



*Iowa Ag Secretary Mike Naig*

Sullivan was one of a group of government scientists who celebrated a big first in October. They tracked the movements of a wild lesser scaup, a diving duck, known to be infected with HPAI. It was the first such tracking in North America.

The research could one day help scientists provide poultry producers with real-time estimates of when and where HPAI could spread from wild birds to domestic birds, called spillover events.

More tracking data from infected wild birds is needed before this new research can benefit the poultry industry, but researchers are simultaneously making strides in the development of risk transmission models and vaccines.

**While some avian flu vaccines for poultry are already being used in other countries, including Mexico and Egypt, the United States has yet to authorize their use.**

The tracking study was a cooperative effort among the USGS, University of Delaware, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and University of Georgia. The group has been tracking uninfected wild bird movements for years and compiling the data in transmission interface models, which will eventually allow egg and poultry producers to calculate risk in their individual counties.

“Our group is continuing to develop transmission risk models for each week of the year,” Sullivan said. “We are hoping these transmission interface models will be the first stage of helping prevent spillover events, especially at the county level.”

According to the National Agricultural Statistics Services, the U.S. egg and poultry industries are huge. Americans eat more poultry than any other type of meat, and in 2020, the value of all poultry products produced in the United States exceeded \$35.5 billion.

**While the final cost of the current ongoing outbreak has yet to be tallied, the 2014-15 outbreak resulted in the loss of 50 million chickens and turkeys and required \$879 million in public expenditures to eradicate the disease from poultry production, according to a 2021 study published in *Food Policy*.**

The 2014-15 outbreak has been labeled the costliest animal disease outbreak in U.S. history, but the current ongoing outbreak has already surpassed the 2014-15 crisis in terms of bird losses, even though the nation's response has improved from seven years ago.

"In Iowa so far in 2022, there have been 23 sites affected, whereas in 2015 there were 77 sites. This year's spread is largely due to wild bird introductions while 2015's spread was largely farm to farm," Naig said.

**"Our producers deserve a lot of credit for elevating their biosecurity efforts. They learned from 2015," he added. "We have had earlier detections and aggressive efforts to contain the virus through depopulations, proper disposal, and cleanup."**

Since 2015, Iowa and other states have updated and rewritten their emergency response plans. Iowa for one continues to test its plan, identifying gaps and then continuously updating and exercising its tweaked plan to improve response capabilities.

When a farm becomes infected, regardless of whether it is a backyard or commercial operation, the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship moves quickly to get the word out.

"We think it is important to be transparent. We send a press release out for each positive case, whether it is a commercial or backyard flock. We want everyone in agriculture to know what is going on," Naig said.

State agencies provide the boots on the ground, according to Naig, and are a major part of effective responses. While the states permit movement of birds, implement quarantines, and provide diagnostic services, education, and notification of outbreaks, USDA provides indemnity and research.

In 2018, APHIS finalized the conditions for indemnity, adopting a set of 14 biosecurity principles established by the National Poultry Improvement Plan (NPIP), which serve as the minimum biosecurity principles poultry operations need to follow. Large operations are subject to a biosecurity statement requirement and must be audited every two years to ensure compliance.

**Last spring, as losses from HPAI hit 35 million birds, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced that USDA had already paid about \$146 million in indemnities to poultry owners, with \$263 million still available. In the 2014-15 outbreak, USDA paid a total of \$190 million in indemnity payments.**

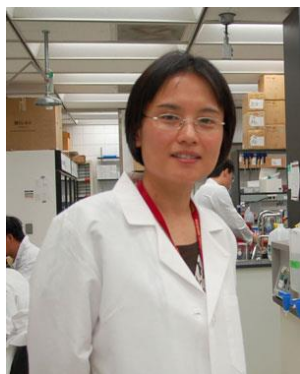
Following that announcement, when losses hit 38 million birds, USDA said it would allocate an \$400 million from the Commodity Credit Corp. to address the current outbreak, including indemnity, diagnostics, field activities, and other emergency response costs. These funds were in addition to the \$393 million in emergency funding announced in March and April.

**One of the reasons that containing HPAI is so costly is that depopulation is the main way to combat outbreaks, since effective vaccines are still not available in the United States.**

One of the challenges to creating effective vaccines is that avian influenzas can mutate rapidly, and to contain an outbreak the industry needs targeted vaccines that are ready to deploy,



according to Yuying Liang, a researcher at the University of Minnesota, who has developed eight vaccine candidates against highly pathogenic H5 and H7 avian influenza viruses.



Yuying Liang, University of Minnesota

**“We do not know what strain or mutation of HPAI will appear or when it will appear. Existing vaccines are unlikely to be effective in new outbreaks,” she said. “Our approach is to use a live viral vector that would cause a strong and broadly protective immune response both in antibodies and T-cells.”**

While these and other vaccines could one day be found safe and effective for use in poultry, there are still some policy hurdles. According to *Science magazine*, some researchers worry that if vaccinating is not done carefully, H5N1 could persist in the environment and continue to mix with strains already in wild birds. To prevent this, poultry producers would need to test for the virus once their birds have been vaccinated to be sure it isn’t circulating silently in any birds inadvertently missed or that didn’t respond fully to the vaccine.

**“Vaccines could have trade implications and that’s important. We need to make sure we don’t do things that disrupt trade,” Naig said. “I’m supportive of the research, but there could be very real consequences.”**

## **Senators call for simplified Rural Development application process at energy hearing**

Both Democratic and Republican senators are pushing for simplified USDA Rural Development program applications, saying the current process is so arduous it favors those who can afford to hire grant writers to produce the necessary paperwork.

USDA's Undersecretary for Rural Development Xochitl Torres Small told members of the Senate Agriculture Committee Tuesday that she shares their concern. However, the department operates a number of different programs and some program-specific statutory requirements require it to include certain application requirements, she said.

**“It’s easy to say we need easier access to our programs,” Torres Small said. “Then we have to peel back the onion and say, “what does it take to do that?””**

Both Sens. John Boozman, an Arkansas Republican and the committee’s ranking member, and Michael Bennet, D-Colo., used their time at the hearing to get Torres Small’s take on the application process. Boozman said he’s concerned about rural communities that are struggling to maintain population and revenue being able to keep up with applicants who have more resources to work with.



Undersecretary for Rural Development Xochitl Torres Small

**“I don’t think it should be that you have to spend thousands of dollars hiring a grant writer in some small community that literally is hemorrhaging population,” Boozman said.**

The agency is working on ways to simplify parts of the process by creating online applications that Torres Small says should make it easier to apply for some programs like the Single Family Housing Program.

She said the agency needs to consider congressional demands when designing applications. For Rural Development's meat and poultry processing expansion program, for instance, applicants are required to submit a feasibility study to make sure that they have a good chance of staying in operation for 10 years.

"Sometimes that complexity that we're asking for in an application is a response to conversations in Congress about making sure that our investments are worthwhile," she said.

Bennet suggested putting together a task force to study the issue, after Torres Small suggested the senators reach out to technical assistance providers, state and local officials and nonprofits, in addition to Rural Development staff when finding ways to simplify the application process.

**Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., said a task force was "an excellent suggestion."**

Sens. Ben Ray Luján, D-N.M., and Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., also brought up the possibility of modifying the definition of "rural" that USDA follows when implementing programs. Torres Small said the criteria can differ by program.

The Community Facilities Direct Loan and Grant Program, for instance, defines "rural" as an area with no more than 20,000 residents. In contrast, the ReConnect grant and loan program for rural broadband balances the density of a population with the distance they need to travel to other populated areas.

Luján expressed concern that communities in the western United States that encompass large swaths of land often get left out of disaster aid because they fall outside of the "rural" definition.

**"As we point out all the time, our county boundaries are larger than some states and our ranches are as large as counties in other parts of America," Luján said. "But when a disaster hits a state like ours with these really large boundaries, we get left out because the definitions don't catch us."**

Torres Small, a former New Mexico congresswoman, said it is challenging to juggle the complexities of individual places when trying to decide what is rural and also what an "unincorporated" area is. Density-based measurements may be different in western communities with large distances between populated communities, she said.

Another topic of discussion at the hearing was the USDA's BioPreferred Program, which requires federal agencies and contractors to purchase biobased products. It also allows biobased product manufacturers to certify their products with the USDA.

Christophe Schilling, the founder and CEO of bio-based manufacturing company Geno, urged the committee to ensure federal agencies comply with the procurement requirements laid out



*Sen. John Boozman, R-Ark. (Photo: Joy Philippi)*

through the program, as well as tracking the percentage of procurement each year to make sure the government is meeting current requirements. He also pressed the senators to ask the USDA, the Commerce Department and the Office of Management and Budget to establish NAICS codes for bio-based products to improve procurement tracking.

**“We encourage the committee to re-energize the program to meet its original goals: spurring economic development, creating new manufacturing jobs and providing new markets for farm commodities,” Schilling said.**

Torres Small said the USDA is working with the Census Bureau on the potential for tracking bio-based product purchases through NAICS codes.

Denny Law, CEO for Golden West Telecommunications Cooperative in Wall, South Dakota, asked the committee to reduce the environmental reporting requirements in Rural Utilities Service loan or grant applications. He also urged the senators to expand the application window past the current 60-day timeline.

Kenneth Herring, general manager of the Mississippi-based Adams County Water Association, testified in favor of giving Rural Development additional financing and servicing options for its water and wastewater programs. He said additional financing options would benefit low-income, underserved and disadvantaged communities.

Herring also asked the committee to raise the population limit for the RUS Water and Wastewater Direct Loan Program. The limit is now 10,000 people.

## **Thanksgiving meal costs up 20% for 2022**

Consumers will need to dig a bit deeper into their pocketbooks to pay for classic Thanksgiving food items this year. The American Farm Bureau’s 37th annual marketplace survey indicates a typical Thanksgiving feast for 10 would be \$64.05, a 20% increase from last year’s average of \$53.31.

Several factors, including inflation, supply chain disruptions, and significant losses to turkey flocks this year, all contributed to the increase, according to AFBF. This year’s national average cost was calculated using 224 surveys completed with pricing data from all 50 states and Puerto Rico.

“General inflation slashing the purchasing power of consumers is a significant factor contributing to the increase in average cost of this year’s Thanksgiving dinner,” said AFBF Chief Economist Roger Cryan. General inflation has been running 7% to 9% in recent months, while the most recent Consumer Price Index report for food consumed at home reveals a 12% increase over the past year.

**“Other contributing factors to the increased cost for the meal include supply chain disruptions and the war in Ukraine,” Cryan said. “The higher retail turkey cost at the grocery store can also be attributed to a slightly smaller flock this year, increased feed costs and lighter processing weights.” Cryan said the supply of whole turkeys available to consumers should be adequate this year, although there may be temporary, regional shortages in some states where avian influenza was detected earlier this year.**

For shoppers who have not yet purchased a turkey, there may still be some bargains. AFBF found that turkey costs more than last year, at \$28.96 for a 16-pound bird. That's \$1.81 per pound, up 21% from last year. However, Farm Bureau "volunteer shoppers" checked prices Oct. 18-31, before most grocery store chains began featuring whole frozen turkeys at sharply lower prices.

According to [USDA Agricultural Marketing Service data](#), the average per-pound feature price for whole frozen turkeys was \$1.11 the week of Nov. 3-9 and 95 cents the week of Nov. 10-16, a decline of 14% in just one week; and the share of stores offering feature prices rose from 29% to 60%. This means consumers who have not yet purchased a turkey should be able to find one at a lower cost than the Farm Bureau average.

The shopping list for Farm Bureau's informal survey includes turkey, stuffing, sweet potatoes, rolls with butter, peas, cranberries, a veggie tray, pumpkin pie with whipped cream, and coffee and milk, all in quantities sufficient to serve a family of 10 with plenty for leftovers.

"We should not take our food supply for granted," said AFBF President Zippy Duvall. "Supporting sustainable productive agriculture in the U.S. and globally is imperative. As many of us gather with family and friends for a special meal, it's a time for giving thanks and doing our part to help those who can't afford a big holiday feast," he added.

## News Briefs:

**Forest Service provides millions in infrastructure funds to Trout Unlimited, National Turkey Federation.** Through funding in the bipartisan infrastructure law, USDA's Forest Service will provide up to \$40 million to Trout Unlimited as part of a five-year agreement to improve watersheds on national forests and grasslands – home to many of America's most important trout and salmon species. Trout Unlimited is identifying a national network of priority waters based on the best fisheries science and guided by its strategic plan. The five-year National Watershed and Aquatic Restoration Initiative aims to increase the pace and scale of watershed restoration on national forests and grasslands, with priority given to projects that use local employees and contractors to improve water quality in underserved communities and on Tribal lands. The funding will build on a partnership between the two that has already restored more than 400 miles of important fish habitat, reconnected more than 700 miles of habitat by removing barriers to fish migration, and improved hundreds of thousands of acres of National Forest System lands, said Chris Wood, president and CEO of Trout Unlimited. In recent years, Trout Unlimited leveraged \$20 million in Forest Service funding to carry out \$62 million worth of projects. At the end of October, the National Wild Turkey Federation signed a similar landmark 20-year national master stewardship agreement with the Forest Service, which included a \$50 million commitment allocated under the infrastructure law. When Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack [announced the Forest Service's wildfire crisis strategy](#) at the beginning of this year, the NWTFF began to identify areas where they could assist. Using funding made possible by this agreement, the NWTFF will develop regional projects to protect communities, reduce wildfire risk, and improve forest health, wildlife habitat and water quality on national forests and grasslands.

**Ag groups push for federal FIFRA preemption action.** A large array of the nation's agricultural organizations want Congress to step in and remind states of the limitations they have to regulate pesticide products within their borders and underscore the importance of the federal law on the subject. In a letter to congressional leaders, more than 330 groups discuss their

concerns about changes in the interpretation of the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act. That shift has led to recent actions taken by states to enforce their own statutes on pesticide products, including through the use of labeling on certain products and other regulations. Those actions, the groups contend, “risk creating an unworkable, inconsistent patchwork of state or municipal pesticide labels that can quickly disrupt commerce and access to these much-needed tools.” Furthermore, the groups argue, state-by-state rulemaking “threatens to jeopardize public confidence in EPA’s authority and science-based regulation under FIFRA, as well as the continued availability of individual tools on which there are contradictory claims.” To rectify, the groups say lawmakers need to “seriously consider the far-reaching implications should this tension go unaddressed by federal policymakers. “The ability of farmers, land managers, and other users to produce an abundant food, feed, and fiber supply, combat public health threats, implement important conservation practices, and maintain vital transportation and utility infrastructure will be significantly impaired,” the letter adds. The message carries the signature of national heavy hitters like the American Soybean Association, American Farm Bureau Federation, National Corn Growers Association and many of their respective state affiliates. Western powers like California Citrus Mutual, the Almond Alliance of California, Western Growers and many others are also among the signatories.

**New study estimates economic value of food pantries.** With food prices soaring, over 50 million Americans rely on free distributions from food banks to help feed their families. But determining the economic value of those contributions has been challenging. Now, new research by USDA and Cornell University estimates that the value of food pantry donations is worth up to \$1,000 annually to participating families and between \$19 and \$28 billion nationwide. The totals underscore food bank systems’ important role in addressing food insecurity, a role that has grown during the pandemic and recent bouts of inflation, said David R. Just, the Susan Eckert Lynch Professor in Science and Business in the Charles H. Dyson School of Applied Economics and Management, part of the Cornell SC Johnson College of Business and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. “Food pantries make a huge difference to the households they serve, for many representing a substantial portion of their income,” Just said. “This is important information for policymakers considering support for the national or local food banking system, like tax breaks for food donation, direct program support from USDA or other efforts.” Just is the co-author of “What is Free Food Worth? A Nonmarket Valuation Approach to Estimating the Welfare Effects of Food Pantry Services,” published recently in the *American Journal of Agricultural Economics*. The lead author is Anne Byrne, a research agricultural economist at USDA’s Economic Research Service. “Private food assistance, especially food banking, has grown in recent decades,” Byrne said. “These organizations have a unique position within the food system and a specific role in food access because they offer quick relief in the form of free groceries to a wide variety of people, typically with minimal administrative hurdles.” The scholars analyzed 13 years of data (2005-17) from a northern Colorado food bank that in 2017 served 10% of Larimer County residents at locations in Fort Collins and Loveland, or about 45,000 households. Extrapolated nationally — based on 389 million visits reported by Feeding America’s 2014 Hunger in America Study — the first-of-their-kind estimates confirm that “food bank services collectively represent a sizeable share of the food landscape,” the researchers wrote. Their estimated value is more than double the sales by farmers markets in 2020, and a significant fraction of federal food stamp (SNAP) benefits that year, which were worth \$74.2 billion, according to the research.

**FDA lays out strategy for preventing infant formula contamination.** The Food and Drug Administration is considering setting up a dedicated cadre of investigators for infant formula production as part of a strategy to prevent contamination of the product. The agency said Tuesday it is also considering realigning staff across the Center for Food Safety and Applied



Nutrition and the Office of Regulatory Affairs to better support regulatory oversight of infant formula. Between September 2021 and February 2022, FDA received complaints about four cases of illness or death in infants who consumed powdered infant formula. FDA has been unable to determine whether the infants became sick from contaminated product linked to Abbott Nutrition's Sturgis, Michigan, infant formula facility and *Cronobacter sakazakii* bacteria, but the illnesses brought widespread attention to the need to make improvements in overall infant formula safety. Over the next several months FDA said it intends to work with stakeholders to finalize a strategy to prevent future illnesses. FDA also plans to review and update its infant formula compliance program to reflect current science on *cronobacter*, and ensure investigators and compliance officers are equipped with the tools and resources needed to enable a consistent and comprehensive approach to inspections of infant formula manufacturing facilities. FDA is also looking to evaluate current testing requirements and determine whether improvements might be appropriate to enhance the safety of finished product. The strategy also looks to continue developing and improving communications for consumers about safe formula preparation and storage. The strategy also proposes to conduct and support research on *cronobacter* and work with other federal, state and local agencies to empower public health officials to identify and investigate *cronobacter* illnesses.

## Farm Hands West: Rendon to step down as assembly speaker next summer

California Assembly Speaker **Anthony Rendon** has announced he will step down from the helm of the chamber on June 30, before he is termed out of office in 2024. He will turn his speakership over to Assemblymember **Robert Rivas**, a Democrat from California's Central Coast. Rivas is the grandson of Mexican immigrants and his grandfather was a migrant farmworker who stood with Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers to advocate for worker rights. Rivas has been chair of the Agriculture Committee in the Assembly and, among other things, worked to provide more housing opportunities for farmworkers.



California Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon

TOMRA Food has hired **Paul Slupecki** as the new senior vice president and head of TOMRA Fresh Food. Slupecki was previously TOMRA

Fresh Food's vice president, head of global sales.

**Beth Ellikidis** has been tapped as the new vice president, agriculture and environment at the Biotechnology Innovation Organization. Ellikidis most recently worked at Zoetis, where she was the head of U.S. public affairs for almost six years. She previously directed public policy for ethanol, energy and renewable products at the National Corn Growers Association and led legislative affairs and political advocacy for the National Grain and Feed Association.

**Megan Rock** has been hired as the new vice president of sustainability and innovation and chief sustainability officer for CHS. Rock previously served as the vice president of corporate responsibility, sustainability and sustainable solutions at Bunge.

**Eric Dell** has been tapped the new president and CEO of the American Bakers Association. Dell comes to ABA from the National Automatic Merchandising Association, where he served as the organization's executive vice president.

**Chris Tutino** has joined Cibus as the new senior director of communication. For the last eight years, he worked at Syngenta as the senior communications manager.

Combest, Sell & Associates, an agricultural advocacy firm, has hired **Holt Bivens** and **Piper Merritt** as associates of the firm with Bivens located in Lubbock, Texas, and Merritt based in D.C. Bivens will focus more on membership and grassroots efforts and Merritt will focus more on government affairs.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman **David Scott**, D-Ga., has promoted several staff members. **Caitlin Balagula** will serve as assistant clerk; she currently is staff assistant and legislative assistant. **Ellis Collier**, who currently serves as a fellow on the committee, will be a legislative analyst. **Emily Pliscott** will now serve as the economist for the committee. She currently is a policy analyst for the Subcommittee on Livestock and Foreign Agriculture and the Subcommittee on Biotechnology, Horticulture, and Research. She will continue her policy work with both subcommittees. **Madeleine Ring** is the new staff assistant. Ring joined the committee as an intern in August, and before that she completed a government affairs internship with USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture.



Beth Ellikidis, BIO

**Dylan Biggs** has been promoted to trade policy coordinator for the U.S. Grains Council. He had been serving as the receptionist and administrative assistant for the council and the National Corn Growers Association in the organizations' co-located offices in Washington, D.C.

The U.S. Wheat Associates has brought on **Dong-Chan Bae** as the new country director in the USW Seoul Office in South Korea. Bae spent the last 25 years working for the Samyang Corp., where he was a manager in Samyang's Grain Procurement Division.

Iowa farmer **Dean Meyer** has been elected as the new chairman of the U.S. Meat Export Federation. Randy Spronk has been selected to serve as the vice chair. Spronk is a Minnesota farmer and previously served as the president of the National Pork Producers Council.

The American Agri-Women elected new national officers at its national convention in Bozeman, Montana. **Arlene Kovash** of Oregon Women for Agriculture is the new secretary and **Jean Goslin** of Kansas Agri-Women is the new vice president of education. Each woman will serve a two-year term.

**Douglas Dean Sims**, the retired CEO of CoBank, died Oct. 24 at 76. Sims launched his long career in the Farm Credit System in 1969, when he accepted a position as a business analyst at the St. Louis Bank for Cooperatives. Sims is widely recognized as playing a vital role in passing legislation to save the Farm Credit System in the 1980s. In 1989, Sims was the chief operating officer of CoBank when he was named CEO in 1994.

**Best regards,**

**Sara Wyant**  
**Editor**

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