

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**March 27, 2000**

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LAST WEEK:

FARM POLICY FIELD HEARINGS – The House Committee Agriculture held two farm policy hearings over the weekend. The hearing on Saturday was held in Memphis, Tennessee and Sunday, in Auburn Alabama. The Committee heard testimony from a total of 37 agricultural producers. There was general agreement among witnesses regarding the need for regulatory and tax relief, but their views varied on improving federal farm policy. The goal of the sessions has been to listen to agricultural producers' personal experiences and their suggestions for making federal policies more effective and responsive.

FREEDOM TO E-FILE MARKUP – On Thursday, March 23, the Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee (Chairman Goodlatte, R-VA) of the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing on the Freedom to E-File Act, H.R. 852. Chairman Goodlatte introduced a substitute amendment, which passed by voice vote. Under the bill, the Agriculture Department would establish an electronic filing and retrieval system to allow farmers electronic access to forms and filing capabilities. The bill also requires the Agriculture Department to electronically post information on farm programs, quarterly trade reports, economic and production reports. The Department is required to begin providing Internet access for certain forms 180 days after the bill's enactment. The Secretary of Agriculture would also be required to ensure that all agencies affected by the bill use compatible hardware and software, including the Farm Service Agency, the Risk Management Agency and the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

Eva Clayton, N.C., the Subcommittee's Ranking Democrat, expressed concerns regarding funding to develop the online services. Mr. Goodlatte explained that the Department receives a \$1.3 billion budget for information technology and past hearings have proven that money has not been well spent.

SENATE APPROVES CROP INSURANCE BILL – On Thursday, the Senate passed S. 2251 by a vote of 99-5. The legislation would increase the federal share of crop insurance premiums in order to help the farm economy and end the reliance on disaster aid. The bill will now go to conference with the House, which passed its version last September. Before final passage the Senators approved, by a vote of 99-1, to include an amendment by Paul Wellstone, D-MN to commend the farmers and families who came to the Capitol this week for the Rally for Rural Americans.

The bill also includes provisions that will make a conservation plan a contingency for participation in the crop insurance program.

The House and Senate bills both call for about \$6 billion in spending to subsidize premiums from 2001 to 2004. The House version makes the government responsible for 31 percent to 67 percent of premiums, the Senate version calls for the government to pay 45 percent to 60 percent of premiums. Because the two bills are similar, Congressional staffs expect Conferees to swiftly produce a workable compromise draft.

WATER RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT ACT HEARING – On Wednesday, March 22, the Water Resources and Environment Subcommittee (Chairman Boehlert, R-NY) of the House Transportation Committee held a hearing on the Army Corps of Engineers (the Corps) proposed legislation for the Water Resources Development Act of 2000. Lieutenant General Joe N. Ballard, Chief of Engineers, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and Dr. Joseph W. Westphal, Assistant Secretary of the Army (Civil Works) were the primary witnesses. At the time of the hearing the Corps draft legislation had not yet cleared the Administrative review processes and was not yet ready for submission to Congress. Secretary Westphal assured the Committee that the legislation would be ready for submission to Congress no later than the first week of April.

LEGISLATION OF NOTE

The following Bills of significance to NRCS and conservation have been introduced.

BILL	MEMBER	PURPOSE
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H.R. 3908	Young (FL)	Making emergency supplemental appropriations for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2000, and for other purposes.
H.R. 3919	Saxton (NJ)	To provide assistance for the conservation of coral reefs, to coordinate Federal coral reef conservation activities, and for other purposes.
H.R. 3996	Talent (MO)	To provide for grants to assist value-added agricultural business.
H.R. 4013	Kind (WI)	To establish a cooperative effort of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of the Interior to reduce sediment and nutrient loss in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. Also extends the Authority of many USDA conservation programs.
S. 2251	Lugar (IN)	To amend the Federal Crop Insurance Act to improve crop insurance coverage, to provide agricultural producers with choices to manage risk, and for other purposes.

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THIS WEEK:

CLEAN AIR, WETLANDS BUDGET – The Clean Air, Wetlands, Private Property and Nuclear Safety Subcommittee (Chairman Inhofe, R-OK) of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee will hold a hearing on the fiscal 2001 budget request for clean air programs of the Environmental Protection Agency and wetlands projects of the Army Corp of Engineers.

Mar. 28 9:30 p.m. 406 Dirksen Bldg.

FARM POLICY REVIEW – The House agriculture Committee (Chairman Combest, R-TX) will hold a hearing on federal farm policy.

Mar. 29 10:00 a.m. 1300 Longworth Bldg.

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT HEARING – The House Resources Committee (Chairman Young, R-AK) will hold a hearing on legislation, H.R. 3160, that would reauthorize and restructure the Endangered Species Act.

Mar. 29 11:00 a.m. 1324 Longworth Bldg.

CALIFORNIA WATER PROJECT – The Water and Power Subcommittee (Chairman Doolittle, R-CA) of the House Resources committee will hold a hearing on the California Central Valley Project (CVP) operations and the CALFED program, which is a state-federal cooperative program with management and regulatory responsibility in the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento River Delta estuary area.

Mar. 30 10:00 a.m. 1334 Longworth

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LOOKING AHEAD:

FARM POLICY FIELD HEARINGS – House Agriculture Committee Chairman, Larry Combest (R-TX) and Ranking Member Charlie Stenholm (D-TX) have announced the schedule of farm policy hearings in 10 cities in regions from March through May, encouraging producers to submit detailed proposals for agriculture policy. Although each hearing may last for up to four hours, full discussion of producers' plans and Committee Members' questions will limit the number of witnesses who can testify at the hearings. Producers may be invited to offer testimony as a witness, or if not selected, producers may either submit specific views for the record, or e-mail informal comments to the Committee. To be considered as a potential witness at the hearing, producers should include information about their agricultural experience and their farming operations. The Committee will select witnesses who are qualified to provide specific testimony about federal farm policy, and answer questions posed by Agriculture Committee Members about policy alternatives.

The schedule for the Farm Policy Field Hearings are as follows:

Monday, March 27
Raleigh, North Carolina
North Carolina State Univ.
McKimmon Center Area 1
9:00 a.m. Eastern Time

Saturday, April 1
West Chester, Ohio
Lakota East High School
10:00 a.m. Eastern Time

Monday, April 3
Kutztown, Pennsylvania
Kutztown University
9:00 a.m. Eastern Time

Monday, May 1
Sacramento, California
Heidrick Ag History Center
(Woodland, California)
8:30 a.m. Pacific Time

Tuesday, May 2
Sioux Falls, South Dakota
Augustana College
8:30 a.m. Central Time

Friday, May 12
Boise, Idaho
City Council Building
10:00 a.m. Mountain Time

Saturday, May 13
Peoria, Illinois
Peoria Civic Center
8:30 a.m. Central Time
