

News from Washington: September 10-16

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Farm Bill Tit-For-Tweet

Farm bill negotiations on Thursday reached new partisan highs — or lows, depending on how you look at it. President Donald Trump interjected himself into the debate on Twitter by accusing Senate Agriculture ranking member Debbie Stabenow and Democrats of intentionally hamstringing conference talks because of opposition to the House version's new work requirements for SNAP recipients.

Trump has sent a number of farm bill tweets, but this is the first time he's singled out a lawmaker to blame for the tough slog in the discussions. Stabenow and the rest of the "Big Four" coalition — Senate Agriculture Chairman Pat Roberts, House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway and ranking member Collin Peterson — have been holding closed-door negotiations for weeks but still remain far apart as they try to reach a deal on H.R. 2 (115) ahead of the Sept. 30 expiration.

Trump didn't single out Roberts, a fellow Republican, who also doesn't favor language on the expanded work requirements. Roberts has said many times that there would be no shot at getting the 60 votes needed to overcome a filibuster in the Senate with such a provision.

The Michigan Democrat retorted, also via Twitter, that the Senate version enjoyed bipartisan support by a wide margin, 86-11. (The House version didn't pass the first time and only squeaked through a second time by two votes.) "I'm not letting politics distract me from working across the aisle to finalize a good bill that will deliver certainty for farmers and families in Michigan and across the country," she [tweeted](#).

Conaway, who said he appreciated Trump's message, had some choice words for Stabenow. "She's got to come to the table, and so far from my perspective, I'm not getting the kind of negotiating out of her that gets us to a deal," he said.

He also said the responsibility for passing a farm bill rests with the Big Four. "If we can't deliver that, then the reasons why need to be fully vetted so that [farmers] understand exactly who supports them and who doesn't," Conaway said.

Both Roberts and Conaway said that a late-night Wednesday meeting resulted in some "progress" but didn't explain further. The Big Four are set to have a phone call on Friday; the two House Ag Committee leaders might come back to D.C. next week to hold more in-person meetings while the lower chamber is on recess.

Ag Senators Pepper Officials with Trade Questions

Senate Agriculture members grilled high-ranking leaders of USDA and the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative during a hearing Thursday over the Trump administration's trade policies and the resulting harm to farmers from retaliatory tariffs.

Both Republicans and Democrats on the panel gave an earful to USDA chief economist Robert Johansson, Undersecretary for Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs Ted McKinney, and USTR's chief agricultural negotiator Gregg Doud. The common theme of the questions: When will the trade pain end for ag producers?

“It seems like the light at the end of the tunnel is a train coming at my farmers,” said Sen. Joe Donnelly (D-Ind.), who’s seeking reelection this November in one of the year’s tight races. “They need to know that there’s an off-ramp, or an end to this.”

“The concern and anxiety level is continuing to rise in farm country,” said John Thune of South Dakota, the third-highest ranking Senate Republican. “My impression is it seems to fall on deaf ears around here.”

Aside from the bipartisan angst from farm-state lawmakers, the hearing produced some new details from Doud about ongoing trade negotiations. Here’s a rundown of the highlights:

- **TPP:** Top Republicans asked about rejoining the 11-member Trans-Pacific Partnership. Doud said Trump is correct to prefer a bilateral approach. “I’ve heard that now for the last couple of years, since we decided to pull out of TPP, that we’re working on bilateral trade agreements,” Thune said. “But I don’t see any evidence that we are.”
- **Ag is a must-have:** Doud said U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer stressed to his counterpart this week that trade talks between the U.S. and EU must include agricultural issues, even if it is tough for the bloc’s member nations to yield on the issue. He also criticized China at length over its ag barriers and tariffs.
- **Canadian milk:** Ending Canada’s Class 7 milk pricing program (a recent classification created for certain milk protein byproducts that are used in goods like cheese and yogurt) is the primary focus of dairy discussions between the U.S. and Canada, Doud said. U.S. officials contend Canada’s practices dried up demand for U.S. milk protein and encouraged Canada to dump its excess on the world market in violation of international trade rules.

USDA Details Trade Damage Estimate Calculations

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue today released a detailed accounting of how the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) calculated estimated damage from trade disruptions. USDA’s Office of the Chief Economist developed an estimate of gross trade damages for commodities with assessed retaliatory tariffs by Canada, China, the European Union, Mexico, and Turkey to set commodity payment rates and purchase levels in the [trade mitigation package announced by USDA on September 4, 2018](#). USDA employed the same approach often used in adjudicating World Trade Organization trade dispute cases.

“We have pledged to be transparent about this process and how our economists arrived at the numbers they did,” Perdue said. “Our farmers and ranchers work hard to feed the United States and the world, and they need to know that USDA was thorough, methodical, and as accurate as possible in making these estimates. It was a large and important task, and I thank Chief Economist Robert Johansson and his staff for their hard work.”

The full description of the Trade Damage Estimation for the Market Facilitation Program and Food Purchase and Distribution Program is available on the [website of USDA’s Office of the Chief Economist](#) (PDF, 492 KB).

[Source: USDA](#)

Pesticide Makers See Legal Losses Piling Up

Chemical companies have been on a losing streak in recent court cases over the use of their products on plants and farms, and environmentalists who consider the substances harmful to public health and the environment see this as a moment of reckoning for agribusinesses like DowDuPont and Bayer, which now controls Monsanto.

“These recent decisions collectively show the justice system’s recognition of what the American public ... and scientists have been aware of for some time: These pesticides are harmful to human health and the environment,” said George Kimbrell, legal director for the Center for Food Safety.

A look at the recent cases: In August, a U.S. appellate court ordered EPA to ban the use of chlorpyrifos, a pesticide used on fruits, vegetables and nuts that has been linked to memory loss, attention deficit disorder and other neurological problems in children.

Also last month, a California jury sided with a former groundskeeper who alleged that Monsanto’s Roundup weedkiller, which includes the herbicide glyphosate, gave him terminal cancer. More than 5,000 other people are suing the company, claiming Monsanto hid the potential cancer risk posed by its products.

Dicamba, Monsanto’s other widely used and controversial weedkiller, is also the subject of multiple lawsuits, and EPA is expected to make a decision by November about reauthorizing it.

The makers of the pesticides say the new rulings will damage farmers’ ability to grow crops. DowDuPont’s new agriculture division, Corteva, said after last month’s ruling that “chlorpyrifos is a critical pest management tool” and that the company “will continue to support the growers who need this important product.” The conglomerate is the biggest manufacturer of chlorpyrifos. “Glyphosate transformed agriculture,” Scott Partridge, Monsanto’s vice president of global strategy, told Liz. “When you have plaintiffs lawyers trying to take that out of the hands of growers around the world, a product that’s a safe tool ... I am offended.”

Perdue: USDA Will Look into Immigrants Dropping From WIC

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue expressed concern about reports that immigrants are dropping out of WIC due to fears that using the aid could mean being denied a green card in the future. He said USDA will look into the matter.

“I would be concerned about that, obviously. We’ll look into that further,” Perdue said during a [wide-ranging interview](#) on C-SPAN’s “Newsmakers” that took place on Friday and aired over the weekend.

Public health advocates have been alarmed over anecdotal evidence from at least 18 states showing a drop in participation after news reports that the White House is considering a new policy that could deny legal status to immigrants who have received a broad range of health, nutrition and education benefits, including WIC. USDA has long touted WIC as one of the most successful and cost-effective nutrition programs because it’s been shown to improve health outcomes for moms and infants.

Perdue said he believes it’s crucial that the government strike the right balance in administering public assistance. Americans are “some of the most compassionate, generous people in the world,” he said, but taxpayers are also concerned about how funds are spent.

“We do not want immigrants, particularly those who are coming undocumented or illegally into the country, to come in and take advantage of the programs that the taxpayers are providing there,” Perdue said. “But when it comes to women and children, I think we have to lean on the side of compassion.”

Perdue Plugs Ag Worker Visa Bill

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue wants Congress to pass an immigration bill overhauling the H-2A agricultural guest-worker program, even though major agriculture groups in the West oppose the measure, the USDA chief said Monday at a gathering of state ag officials.

The legislation from House Judiciary Chairman Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) would change the existing program (and rebrand it as H-2C) by expanding it to include both seasonal and year-round labor needs. House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway (R-Texas) and ranking member Collin Peterson (D-Minn.) are both co-sponsors of the bill, H.R. 6417 (115).

“There is some dispute about it from our Western brethren over whether it addresses all the issues,” the secretary acknowledged at a conference hosted by the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture. But he thinks it’s about the best ag could get at this point to remedy its persistent labor shortage.

The Western Growers Association and California Farm Bureau oppose the measure, and several Golden State Republicans are wary because it includes an “E-Verify” provision that would require employers to verify the legal status of their workers — potentially hampering their ability to find enough labor.

Another controversial provision would force farm laborers who are in the country illegally to return to their countries of origin to apply for the new H-2C visa.

House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.) had promised some GOP members a vote on the Goodlatte labor bill before the August recess. That didn’t happen, in part because it appeared to lack enough support to pass.

Poverty Drops Slightly

The official rate of poverty in the U.S. dropped just slightly in 2017, disappointing anti-poverty and anti-hunger advocates who had hopped for a bigger decline against the backdrop of a strengthening economy.

Data released by the U.S. Census Bureau on Wednesday showed the rate of Americans living in poverty went from 12.7 percent in 2016 to 12.3 percent in 2017. The decline was welcome news, no doubt, for those whose income inched up. But, ultimately, it wasn’t statistically significant.

There’s another measure anti-hunger advocates keep a close eye on: The Supplemental Poverty Measure, which takes into account how programs like SNAP and other assistance initiatives factor in. The SPM rate was 13.9 percent in 2017. That was essentially unchanged from 14 percent in 2016. The report said SNAP benefits kept some 3.4 million people above the poverty threshold. School meals kept 1.2 million above the line and WIC boosted 279,000 individuals. Here’s the [latest report](#).

The Food Research & Action Center pointed to the data as an example of why Congress shouldn’t impose new work requirements on SNAP recipients, as the House version of the farm bill, H.R. 2 (115), would do.

“One important step that Congress can take now is to pass a farm bill that protects and strengthens SNAP,” said Jim Weill, the group’s president. “This means rejecting the proposed

cuts to SNAP in the House bill that would increase poverty and hunger for children, seniors, people with disabilities, veterans, working families, and others across the country.”

Robert Rector, a senior research fellow at The Heritage Foundation, argued Wednesday that the report overstates poverty in America because it doesn't count most government aid when it looks at income for its topline numbers. Rector advocates for consideration of the Consumer Expenditure Survey put out by the Labor Department.

“Clearly, welfare benefits — if counted correctly — reduce poverty,” he said. He argued the system is “inefficient” and should be “fundamentally redesigned so that aid complements and encourages self-sufficiency rather than displacing it.”

Anti-Hunger Worries Public Charge Chilling All Nutrition Access

Anti-hunger advocates fear the Trump administration's consideration of a proposal that could bar immigrants from getting a green card or visa if they or someone in their family has used government aid is having an even broader impact than is being reported.

There have been reports in recent months on public charge fears affecting enrollment in SNAP, Medicaid and most recently on WIC, but advocates say they've also seen a drop in summer meal participation in some places due to the same concerns.

“We are looking at this,” Gonzales of No Kid Hungry at Share our Strength said Tuesday. She noted a decline in participation and anecdotal reports of families declining to participate due to immigration anxiety. “It has a very chilling effect,” she said. “What does this mean? It means that children are going hungry. It means that children are not getting the type of health attention that they are eligible for. That is really a public health concern.”

Cell-Based Meat Spat Unresolved in Ag Approps Talks

House and Senate negotiators are racing to work out a final Agriculture-FDA appropriations bill before the current fiscal year ends (and funding expires) on Sept. 30. But a nettlesome oversight issue over cell-grown meat is one of several issues holding up a deal.

During a conference meeting on Thursday over a four-bill minibus appropriations package, Republicans and Democrats leading the Agriculture-FDA spending talks said USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service, not FDA, should have authority to regulate the increasingly trendy cultured meat products, which are grown from animal cells to recreate foods like burger patties and chicken nuggets.

“Clearly USDA needs to be in charge of this issue, and I strongly support language we have included to require it,” said Sen. John Hoeven (R-N.D.), who chairs the Appropriations subcommittee overseeing agriculture. “Very important on behalf of our ranchers.”

Rep. Sanford Bishop of Georgia, top Democrat on the House subcommittee, echoed that position and said it's “important for Congress to play a role early on” in steering oversight of the expanding industry. FSIS and FDA plan to sit down in October to discuss publicly regulations for lab-grown meat and poultry products.

A final version of the spending package, H.R. 6147 (115), is seen as unlikely to pass before Sept. 30. That means a continuing resolution might be needed to avoid a shutdown at USDA, FDA and other agencies. Still, appropriators claimed on Thursday that they have a shot at driving the minibus across the finish line before October.

“Don’t give up on these yet,” Senate Appropriations Chairman Richard Shelby (R-Ala.) said of the four bills.

Farmers Brace for Hurricane Florence

Hurricane Florence is bearing down on the Carolinas and Virginia, and it could hit the local ag sector especially hard. North Carolina, sitting squarely in the storm’s projected path, is home to farms that raise some 9 million pigs, the second most in the U.S. It’s also one of the top turkey producing states. Hog farmers there are bracing for impact, shifting pigs from flood-prone areas to higher ground and amassing feed supplies.

“The preparations for a hurricane began long before the past few hours or days,” North Carolina Pork Council President Brandon Warren said in a statement. “Our farmers take hurricane threats extremely seriously.”

Others are keeping an eye on swine-waste lagoons that could overflow with heavy rain and flooding, sending bacteria-filled sludge into the surrounding floodwater and potentially causing environmental and public health problems.

The pork industry claims environmental groups have exaggerated the extent of waste overflow after previous storms. Fourteen manure lagoons flooded when Hurricane Matthew hit the state in October 2016, and two lagoons on one farm were partially breached, according to North Carolina’s Department of Environmental Quality.

“By design, solids are stored and remain at the bottom of the lagoon, and the liquids at the top are heavily diluted, minimizing the environmental impact,” NCPC [said](#), adding that hog farmers are reporting their lagoons can withstand more than 25 inches of rain.

This [map](#) of permitted swine, cattle and poultry operations in North Carolina, from NCDEQ, shows the high concentration of sites in the eastern part of the state — right where Florence could end up landing later this week.

When Matthew battered North Carolina two years ago, it caused \$400 million in damage to major crop fields, according to 2016 data from the state’s Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. Poultry deaths reached 1.9 million, and about 2,800 swine were killed. The damage from Hurricane Floyd in 1999 was far worse: About 21,500 swine were killed, 50 waste lagoons were flooded and six of them breached, according to NCPC.

NHC expects Florence to dump between 15 and 25 inches of rain on parts of the Carolinas and north through the heart of the Mid-Atlantic, though as much as 35 inches could fall in isolated areas, causing “catastrophic flash flooding and significant river flooding.”