

## News from Washington: February 15-19

### **Biden Immigration Bill Requires Farmworker Overtime, Offers Expedited Citizenship**

Congressional Democrats introduced a sweeping immigration bill backed by President Joe Biden that would require farms to start paying overtime and provide an expedited path to citizenship for undocumented farmworkers.

The [353-page measure](#), which is built on Biden's immigration reform plan and called the U.S. Citizenship Act, all but eliminates [an exemption](#) for farms from federal overtime and minimum wage requirements that is in current law. Family members would continue to be exempt.

The bill doesn't include any reforms to expand or replace the H-2A visa program for foreign farmworkers. Year-round work is ineligible for H-2A.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Senate Sets Vilsack Vote**

An end is finally in sight in the wait for a new agriculture secretary. The Senate has scheduled action for Feb. 23 on Tom Vilsack's nomination to return for a second stint at the head of USDA.

That means that USDA will go more than a month without a Senate-confirmed secretary to make the critical decisions needed to move forward with President Joe Biden's agenda for the department.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Farm Groups Weigh in Against Phosphate Duties**

The American Soybean Association, National Corn Growers Association and National Cotton Council are joining the fray over a U.S. company's efforts to convince the Commerce Department to slap duties on phosphate fertilizer imports from Morocco and Russia. The U.S. International Trade Commission is currently weighing The Mosaic Co.'s claims that they are harmed by subsidized imports. A decision is expected in March.

"We believe countervailing duties on these imports will have a negative impact on the availability of phosphate fertilizer in the United States and, in turn, adversely affect crop production and farmer livelihoods," ASA President Kevin Scott said in a statement after the farm groups filed their [joint comments](#) with the ITC.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Grassley Invites Climate Czar to Midwest**

Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley is inviting Biden's climate czar to see firsthand how ag producers are helping improve the environment and mitigate climate change.

"Instead of pointing the finger, I am hoping we can again work together and learn from each other," Grassley says in a [letter](#) inviting Gina McCarthy (above) to his farm. McCarthy, a former EPA administrator who famously clashed with farm groups over the Obama-era "waters of the U.S." rule, is now overseeing climate policy for the White House.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

## **COVID-19 Update: USDA, FDA Underscore Current Epidemiologic and Scientific Information Indicating No Transmission of COVID-19 Through Food or Food Packaging**

After more than a year since the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) outbreak was declared a global health emergency, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention continue to underscore that there is no credible evidence of food or food packaging associated with or as a likely source of viral transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus causing COVID-19.

Our confidence in the safety of the U.S. food supply remains steadfast. Consumers should be reassured that we continue to believe, based on our understanding of currently available reliable scientific information, and supported by overwhelming international scientific consensus, that the foods they eat and food packaging they touch are highly unlikely to spread SARS-CoV-2.

It's particularly important to note that COVID-19 is a respiratory illness that is spread from person to person, unlike foodborne or gastrointestinal viruses, such as norovirus and hepatitis A that often make people ill through contaminated food. While there are relatively few reports of the virus being detected on food and packaging, most studies focus primarily on the detection of the virus' genetic fingerprint rather than evidence of transmission of virus resulting in human infection. Given that the number of virus particles that could be theoretically picked up by touching a surface would be very small and the amount needed for infection via oral inhalation would be very high, the chances of infection by touching the surface of food packaging or eating food is considered to be extremely low.

[Read more from USDA.](#)

## **Collapse in CRP Acreage Poses Challenge for Climate Policy**

Democrats are preparing to pour money into federal conservation programs as a key way to pay farmers to address climate change. Converting marginal croplands to grass through the Conservation Reserve Program is one way to do it, but the question is whether USDA can get landowners interested in CRP again.

Enrollment in the 35-year-old program has been in steady decline for more than a decade and is now at its lowest level ever as prices of corn, soybeans, cotton are reaching heights farmers haven't seen for several years.

Fewer than 20.8 million acres are currently enrolled in the program — far short of the 25 million acre limit set by Congress for fiscal 2021 — and 3 million of the existing CRP acres are in contracts set to expire Sept. 30, with another 4 million acres due to leave in 2022.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

## **Biden Mentions Trade in First Official Call to Chinese President Xi**

President Biden held his first official phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping Wednesday and indicated there will be adjustments to trade policies under the Trump administration.

A senior Biden official told Politico a different approach with China will depend on internal consultations across government and consultation with partners in Europe and Asia. But the official added tariffs put in place by the previous administration will remain for the time being while the policy is under review.

A transcript of the call shows Biden confronted China's leader about "coercive and unfair economic practices" and human rights abuses.

They also discussed COVID-19 and climate change.

[Source: Brownfield Ag News](#)

### **GOP Targets Ag District Democrats in 2022 but Faces Vulnerabilities Within**

The battle to control the House of Representatives in the 2022 midterm elections could come down to efforts in a handful of rural districts.

House Republicans are targeting 47 Democratic seats as they look to take back the majority in 2022, including nine seats in significant agricultural districts. Democrats have their eyes on several GOP House members in rural areas where Democrats have done well in recent elections.

Some rural GOP-held seats [also could be wiped out by redistricting](#) as a result of the 2020 Census.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **FACT SHEET: Update on USDA Activities to Contain the COVID-19 Pandemic**

In January 2021, President Biden released the National Strategy for the COVID-19 Response and Pandemic Preparedness. The plan is driven by science, data, and public health to improve the effectiveness of our nation's fight against COVID-19 and to restore trust, accountability and a sense of common purpose in our response to the pandemic.

The National Strategy provides a roadmap to guide America out of the worst public health crisis in a century. It is organized around seven goals:

1. Restore trust with the American people.
2. Mount a safe, effective, and comprehensive vaccination campaign.
3. Mitigate spread through expanding masking, testing, data, treatments, health care workforce, and clear public health standards.
4. Immediately expand emergency relief and exercise the Defense Production Act.
5. Safely reopen schools, businesses, and travel while protecting workers.
6. Protect those most at risk and advance equity, including across racial, ethnic and rural/urban lines.
7. Restore U.S. leadership globally and build better preparedness for future threats.

The plan calls on all parts of the federal government to contribute its resources—facilities, personnel, and expertise—to contain the pandemic. Chief among the efforts is a whole-of-government response to stand up new federally supported community vaccination centers across the country.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) is responding to the President's call to action. In addition to personnel, USDA is offering its facilities, cold chain infrastructure, public health experts, disaster response specialists, and footprint in rural areas and Tribal communities across the country. Here are the some of the ways USDA is working alongside our federal partners to contain the pandemic and get our economy back on track.

[Read more from USDA.](#)

### **Bonnie Eyes Outreach To Farmers, Foresters on Climate**

USDA's top climate policy adviser, Robert Bonnie, says the department has a little over 30 days to carry out its outreach to farmers, ranchers and forest managers on climate policy.

An [executive order signed by President Joe Biden](#) required USDA to get input from the sector on how agriculture should be involved in addressing climate change, a top priority for the administration.

Speaking at USDA's annual Ag Outlook Forum, Bonne also said the department has about 75 days to complete a report on climate-smart agriculture.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Immigration Bill Lacking Ag Priorities**

Biden's immigration bill has finally been introduced in Congress, and it's well short of what will be needed to get support from farm groups. The bill offers an expedited path to citizenship for farmworkers but there's no expansion in the H-2A program, and the legislation would require farms to start paying overtime.

The bill's sponsors acknowledged it will be tough to pass a broad immigration bill and wouldn't rule out trying to attach pieces of Biden's proposal to a budget reconciliation bill that wouldn't need GOP votes.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Study IDs Farmland Stores of 'Surplus Nitrogen'**

A new study has identified 20 "hotspots of opportunity" (shown above) where farmers and government agencies should focus their nitrogen reduction efforts. According to the study, farmers in those areas could cut nitrogen usage without hurting crop yields.

The nitrogen surplus areas "represent a whopping 63% of the total surplus nitrogen balance in U.S. croplands, but only 24% of U.S. cropland area," says a news release from the University of Vermont. "In total, they comprise 759 counties across more than 30 states," according to the study published in [Environmental Research Letters](#).

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)

### **Ag's Share of GHG Emissions Rose in 2019**

The share of agriculture's greenhouse gas emission in the U.S. increased to about 9.6% in 2019 from 9.3% in 2018, according to EPA's annual [report](#), released Friday.

The increased percentage resulted from higher emissions from agriculture and lower emissions overall. EPA reported GHG emissions dropped 1.7% from 2018 to 2019. Emissions from fossil fuel combustion fell 2.7% between 2018 and 2019, but still accounted for about 74% of all emissions.

[Read more from Agri-Pulse.](#)