

**WEEKLY LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**

**September 18, 2000**

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**LAST WEEK:**

**UPPER MISSISSIPPI RIVER BASIN CONSERVATION ACT OF 2000** – The Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities, Resources Conservation and Credit (Chairman Barrett, R-NE) of the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing on September 13. The hearing focused on H.R. 4013, The Upper Mississippi River Basin Conservation Act of 2000, a bill that provides measures to help reduce sediment loss in the Upper Mississippi River Basin. The hearing consisted of two witness panels. The first panel included bill co-sponsors Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI) and Rep Gil Gutknecht (R-MN). Both members expounded on the Basin’s need for sediment reduction, the importance of the Mississippi River to the region, and the merits of H.R. 4013. Testifying on the second panel were Tom Weber, NRCS Deputy Chief of Programs, Dr. Robert Hirsch, Associate Director for Water, US Geological Survey, and Holly Stoerker, Executive Director, Upper Mississippi River Basins Association. Deputy Chief Weber and Associate Director Hirsch both conveyed the Administration’s support for concepts contained in the bill as well as their agencies’ willingness to work with Mr. Kind on the issues contained in the bill.

In their testimonies, Mr. Kind and Mr. Gutknecht both stressed the need for voluntary incentive based conservation. An even greater emphasis was placed on the need for a strong conservation title in the 2002 Farm Bill, with increased financial and technical assistance for NRCS. Chairman Barrett expressed concern over the regional approach of H.R. 4013 to Mr. Kind. Mr. Kind in return stated his want to expand the scope of this legislation to other parts of the Mississippi River Basin as well as other parts of the country. Mr. Kind also recognized that this effort would require increased financial and technical assistance funds as well as increased program funds. Ms. Stoerker also expressed similar concerns about the need for increases in NRCS funding. Overall, there was great recognition of the value of NRCS and the agencies need for additional funding.

**AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT OFFICE OF CIVIL RIGHTS**

**OVERSIGHT HEARING** - The Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee (Chairman Lugar, R-IN) held an oversight hearing on the Department of Agriculture's Office of Civil Rights on September 12<sup>th</sup>. The Committee heard testimony from witnesses of three panels. Panel One witnesses were Roger Viadero, USDA-OIG and Bob Robertson, GAO. The Department was represented by Paul Fiddick, Assistant Secretary for Administration, Rosalind Gray, Director, Office of Civil Rights, David Winningham, Chief Operating Officer, Office of Civil Rights and Charles Rawls, General Council. The third panel consisted of leaders of farm organizations, employee organizations and public citizens.

The discussion focused around USDA's inability to manage its program delivery and employees in a manner that is fair and equitable to all. There was discussion about the Office of Civil Rights progress in clearing up the backlog of claims against the Department. Chairman Lugar stated that the Committee's goals were to learn more about what is going on, "focus on solutions to the problems and solutions that can bring accountability into the equation."

**LESSONS OF PRIVATE CONSERVATION HEARING** - On September 14<sup>th</sup>, the Forest and Forest Health Subcommittee (Chairwoman Chenoweth-Hage, R-ID) of the House Resources Committee held a hearing on the lessons of private conservation. Private citizen witnesses included a South Carolina tree farmer; a California rancher; and representatives from Natural Bridge, Virginia; Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania; North Maine Woods, Maine; and The Center for Private Conservation. The witnesses' testimony made the following points: Proper and full use of the land is good conservation. Private conservation can be profitable as well as provide a public benefit. Private landowners can be more efficient and care more about the land than the government. Regulations, paperwork and meetings do not preserve the land, people preserve it. Land does not have to be publicly owned for the public to use it and enjoy it. The Subcommittee members made several observations primarily about the role of the federal government: The Forest Service used to be self funding, now each budget requests more federal funds than the year before. Preserving our heritage should not be left totally to the bureaucracy, but should also include efforts of private individuals and groups. Seventy-percent of the current fire-damaged land in the west is on poorly managed federal land. About fifty-percent of the land in the United States is owned by a governmental or some other public entity, and the rate of loss of private land is alarming. In general, participants asserted that land that is not being used is not being managed.

**SENATOR MILLER ASSIGNED TO SENATE AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE** - Senator Zell Miller, D-GA, who was appointed to continue the term of the late Senator Paul Coverdell, was approved this week to serve on the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee. Senator Miller was also assigned to the Banking and Veteran's Affairs Committees.

**OHIO FARMLAND PROTECTION BRIEFING-** On Thursday, September 14, 2000, a briefing was held for staff of the Ohio Congressional Delegation on the Farmland Protection Program (FPP). Participants in the briefing included Brian Worth (Rep. David Hobson), Jason Grove (Rep. Ralph Regula), Roger Szemraj (Rep. Marcy Kaptur) and Brian Metzbower (Senator Mike DeWine). State Conservationist, J. Kevin Brown opened the meeting by explaining that Ohio has recently come online with a new state run farmland protection program. He explained several aspects of the program, and how it could relate to the NRCS funded program. Tom Heisler represented NRCS at the national level and explained various aspects of the federal Farmland Protection Program (FPP), including the proposal process, funding history and other technical topics. Doug McKalip, NRCS Legislative Affairs Staff, reviewed recently-passed legislation dealing with farmland protection, and also discussed several measures pending before the Congress. The Congressional staff asked many questions relating to how the program functions, what the demand has been, as well as availability of funding.

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**THIS WEEK:**

**FARMLAND PROTECTION** - The Senate Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry, Conservation, and Rural Revitalization (Chairman Craig, R-ID) will hold a field hearing on farmland protection in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. Tentative witnesses include NRCS Associate Chief, Danny Sells, and State Conservationist (PA), Janet Oertly. Other witnesses include representatives of local and state farmland protection programs.

September 18            10:00 a.m.            Norristown, PA

**INSPECTOR GENERAL REPORTS** – The Department Operations Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee (Chairman Goodlatte, R-Va.) of the House Agriculture Committee will hold a hearing on two reports issued by the Agriculture Department Office of Inspector General, dealing with the Urban Resources Partnership and the Office of the Undersecretary for Natural Resources and Environment.

September 20            10:00 a.m.            1300 Longworth Building

**AGRICULTURE RISK PROTECTION** – The House Agriculture Committee (Chairman Combest, R-TX) will hold a hearing to review the implementation of the Agriculture Risk Protection Act of 2000.

September 21            9:00 a.m.            1300 Longworth Building

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**LOOKING AHEAD:**

**WILDFIRE PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION** – The Forest and Forest Health Subcommittee (Chairwoman Chenoweth-Hage, R-ID) of the House Resources Committee will hold an oversight field hearing on Western wildfire prevention and suppression efforts.

September 16

9:00 a.m.

University of Montana, Missoula MT

