

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**February 19, 2001**

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LAST WEEK

AGRICULTURE COMMITTEE ORGANIZATION MEETING-The House Agriculture (Chairman Combest-TX) held a meeting to organize the Committee for the 107th Congress. The Committee introduced and welcomed new Members and agreed on rules for the 107th Congress.

SENATE CONSERVATION BRIEFING – On Thursday, February 15, 2001, the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry held a comprehensive staff briefing on conservation issues pertaining to reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The briefing was conducted by the Congressional Research Service (CRS) and presented by analyst, Jeffrey Zinn. Mr. Zinn began the briefing by outlining the history of conservation programs on private lands in the U.S. with a special emphasis on the 1985, 1990, and 1996 Farm Bills. He also provided a program by program breakdown of NRCS activities, from various aspects.

Questions from Committee staff varied. Some stated that they had received mixed reviews of the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) and expressed a desire to learn more about the program. Others asked about how programs like the Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP) differed from other activities such as the Continuous CRP. The overarching message that came from several briefing participants was the desire to see better information on the outcomes of the conservation programs rather than outputs. Jeff Zinn noted the availability of funding data, success stories and anecdotal information, but the need to have better modeling and information about the environmental gains that result. Some Committee staff also noted the need to have a better understanding of the economic impacts of agriculture conservation. Mr. Zinn concluded the briefing by pointing out that reductions in the NRCS workforce present additional questions for the next Farm Bill, and that the Committee should consider how technical assistance will be funded. The briefing lasted two hours.

ALLBAUGH CONFIRMED AS DIRECTOR OF FEMA – On Thursday, February 15, 2001, the Senate met to consider the nomination of Joe M. Allbaugh of Oklahoma to be the Director of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). Mr. Allbaugh was confirmed by a vote of 91-0.

FEDERAL FARM POLICY REVIEW-On Wednesday, the House Agriculture Committee (Chairman Combest-TX) held a hearing to review the current state of the farm economy and the economic impact of federal policy on agriculture. Keith Collins, USDA Chief Economist, along with two university agriculture economists, presented an analysis of the current farm economy to assist the Committee as they prepare to reauthorize the Farm Bill 2002. Questions included the concern with market signals, dependency on farm payments, the rate of farm income, agriculture competition abroad, export values, and currency exchange rates. The Committee also discussed policies that affect small farmers and rural communities, as well as energy cost and nitrogen supplies.

LEGISLATION OF NOTE

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

BILL	MEMBER	PURPOSE
S. 333	Lugar, IN	Tax and regulatory relief for farmers
H.R. 626	Boehner, OH	To authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to make grants to non-profits to finance individual water systems in rural areas
H.R. 627	Boehner, OH	Tax and regulatory relief for farmers
S. 312	Grassley, IA	FARRM accounts and tax relief for CRP payments

THIS WEEK

AGRICULTURAL OUTLOOK FORUM-The U.S. Department of Agriculture will sponsor an Agricultural Outlook Forum at which Secretary Veneman and others will discuss prospects for farm policy and trade policy.

Feb. 22 8:15 am Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel
1700 Jefferson Davis Highway
Arlington, VA

PRESIDENT'S DAY RECESS - Both the House and Senate are in recess until Monday, February 26th, 2001

LOOKING AHEAD

CONSERVATION PROGRAMS-The Senate Agriculture Committee will hold a hearing on the oversight and current status of USDA's Conservation Programs on Wednesday, Feb. 28. Tom Weber, Deputy Chief for Programs, will testify on one of two agency panels. The time and location is to be announced. On March 1, the Committee will hear from public witnesses to be determined.

STATE OF THE UNION – On Tuesday February 27, 2001 the House and Senate will convene in a joint session to receive the State of the Union address by President George W. Bush.

