

**LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:****June 21, 1999**

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**LAST WEEK -****SENATE MARKS UP FISCAL YEAR 2000 AGRICULTURE**

**APPROPRIATIONS BILL** - On Tuesday, the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies marked up the FY2000 funding levels for agriculture department programs and agencies. On Thursday, the full Senate Appropriations Committee approved the following levels for NRCS:

Conservation Operations.....	\$656,243,000
Watershed Surveys and Planning.....	\$10,368,000
Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations.....	\$99,443,000
RC&D.....	\$35,000,000
Forestry Incentives Program (FIP).....	\$ 6,325,000
Farmland Protection Program.....	\$ 0
Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP).....	\$ 174,000,000
Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP).....	180,000 acres

**HEARING ON THE LOAN DEFICIENCY PAYMENT PROGRAM** - On Wednesday, June 16, the General Farm Commodities, Resource Conservation and Credit Subcommittee (Chairman Barrett, R-NE) of the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing on the Loan Deficiency Payment Program (LDP). Secretary Glickman served as the only witness. The issue under discussion was whether to shift from a county-based to a national system of determining payment rates. The Secretary expressed four concerns relative to the national LDP rates. The first concern was changes occurring in a few areas of the country where the national rate would have been somewhat lower more times than

higher over the past year. Second, a national LDP rate has the potential to further depress harvest-time prices. Third, the Secretary stated a concern over increased forfeitures. And fourth, he stated that keeping the national LDP consistent with the original purpose of LDPs is needed. The Secretary said he believed they were consistent. He closed by saying the USDA would consider using national LDP rates using 1999 crops of wheat, feed grains, and oilseeds. Secretary Glickman said this would be similar to the procedure that has worked well for the rice and cotton loan programs since 1986.

**SENATE WETLANDS BRIEFING** - On Thursday, June 17th a briefing was held by Senator Tom Daschle's office (D-SD) to discuss the recent action taken by NRCS in South Dakota to ensure that the methods and procedures used to map wetlands are consistent and in compliance with the 1985 Food Security Act (FSA) regulation. Participants in the meeting included Deputy Chief for Programs, Tom Weber; and South Dakota State Conservationist, Dean Fisher. The issue involved mapping conventions developed by the state, minimal effect procedures for certain activities within sloped or linear wetlands, and the converted wetland exemption changes of the 1996 amendments of FSA. Agency staff expect to do a follow-up briefing within the next two weeks to deliver several types of analyses with respect to national impacts, an OGC perspective of the issue, and a summary on joint meetings with the agency partnerships of NRCS, Fish and Wildlife Service, Environmental Protection Agency, and Army Corps of Engineers. Some Senate staffers expressed concern with the process in which NRCS undertook on the issue and the level of involvement of other federal agencies. In addition to aides from the office of Tom Daschle, staff were present from the offices of Senator Rod Grams (R-MN), Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD), Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND), Senator Bob Kerrey (D-NE), and Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN). The Department was represented by Linda Delgato, Executive Assistant to Deputy Secretary Rominger.

**HOUSE WETLANDS BRIEFING** - On Thursday, June 17, NRCS Staff provided a briefing for the House Agriculture Committee including staff representing members from South Dakota, Minnesota and Nebraska regarding adjustments in wetlands policy in that region. Tom Weber, NRCS Deputy Chief for Programs, and Dean Fisher, State Conservationist from South Dakota clarified for the group that NRCS national policy and procedures, which reflect the agency's application of statute and regulations, were not being consistently implemented in South Dakota. For that reason, farmers and producers as well as representatives of environmental concerns along the South Dakota and Minnesota border had raised questions as to these policies. Mr. Weber and Mr. Fisher explained steps that the agency is taking to gain consistency and also stressed that Swampbuster only affects eligibility for USDA program benefits and does not regulate wetlands. They also pointed out that nothing in this procedural adjustment will decrease the number, or acreage, of wetlands that were subject to the 1985 Food Security Act.

**FREEDOM TO E-FILE HEARING** - On Thursday, June 17th the Department Operations, Oversight, Nutrition and Forestry Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing on H.R. 852 sponsored by Representative Ray LaHood of Illinois. This bill would require the Department of Agriculture to establish an electronic filing and retrieval system within 180 days from the enactment date enabling the public to file all required paperwork with the Department and have access to public information. USDA's Deputy Chief Information Officer Ira Hobbs testified on behalf of the Department.



