

Ag disaster aid for 2022 part of Washington to-do list

By Washington Policy Analyst Jim Wiesemeyer and Editor Brian Grete

Some key ag sector issues will be part of a busy September for Congress and some last-minute bills before Nov. 8 elections and a lame-duck session after.

Priority issue: Stop-gap spending bill

Congress again is woefully tardy on getting spending bills for fiscal year (FY) 2023, which begins Oct. 1. The coming Continuing Resolution (CR) would avoid the theatrics of a government shutdown.

White House supplemental spending requests

The supplemental spending request totals \$47 billion, including \$13.7 billion in funds to bolster Ukraine's defenses and shore up federal emergency funds, \$22.4 billion to reinforce efforts to combat Covid-19 and \$4.5 billion to combat monkeypox virus. The administration also called for \$6.5 billion to help states recover from natural disasters.

USDA would get \$1.5 billion for crop & livestock disasters in 2022. Congress will likely add billions but this may take until the omnibus spending bill late this year. Aid will likely be part of USDA's Emergency Relief Program (ERP). Some other ag sector requests could be part of the CR.

Other topics possibly part of CR or omnibus bill

Some of the topics wanting to hitch a ride include:

- Extension for livestock mandatory price reporting is seen as likely congressional action yet this year. Reforms to cattle marketing are still being pushed but are iffy. The Senate Ag Committee passed a pair of bills but some wonder if there are 60 votes to pass the full Senate.

- Child nutrition bill to raise the reimbursement rates for school meal programs, and expand eligibility.

- Water Resources Development Act. This would authorize waterway improvements and spending for flood control and coastal resilience. This is regularly enacted by Congress with bipartisan support every two years. The House passed its bill in June; Senate passed a substitute bill. This must go through the conference process and Congress must pass final legislation before end of the year.

Some contentious issues for packed September agenda

Hot-button topics include defense authorization, action on judicial nominations, policies related to environmental permitting, election rules, same-sex marriage, and U.S./China competition trade issues.

Trade issues being pushed

Trade Adjustment Assistance benefits expired. House Democrats want to include this in the CR. Republicans have criticized the program as too costly. Efforts are underway to reduce tariffs on imports from developing countries. Generalized System of Preferences expired in 2020 but both parties have previously supported it.

Regarding Section 301 tariffs, some lawmakers want to exclude certain Chinese products from punitive tariffs. A Senate majority agreed on a non-binding motion to include it before but the trade provisions were dropped. But the Biden administration continues a go-slow approach regarding Chinese trade policy issues, with Cabinet officials split on Section 301 tariffs.

Other items of note for the waning days of Congress

- Environmental permitting. Streamline the process under the National Environmental Policy Act and Clean Water Act and prioritize permitting for critical energy infrastructure projects. Also overhaul litigation process to reduce "excessive" delays. Democratic leaders made a deal with centrist Sen. Joe Manchin (D-W.Va.) to hold a vote on the proposed changes in exchange for his support on the reconciliation measure. But Progressive Democrats in the House oppose linking permitting reform with the CR.

- Immigrant farmworker status. Overhaul U.S. ag guestworker visa program passed House; action on a Senate bill is possible.

- Rail freight: A bill to give the federal regulator overseeing railroads more power to deal with service complaints is getting a push from House Democrats.

Wild card issues

With some very close elections in store on Nov. 8., and another possible Senate runoff election in December in Georgia, some last-minute surprises could surface.

Some issues that may not make it but are still being pushed include:

- Cannabis: A bill is pending in the Senate to decriminalize marijuana and impose an excise tax. The House passed a similar bill.

- Tech antitrust: Bills are pending in both chambers to ban large online platforms from engaging in anticompetitive practices and in the Senate to promote competition and reduce "gatekeeper power" in the app economy.