

Policy Updates and Issue News June 2018

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View from the Hill



Overview

June was an active legislative time in Washington. After the defeat of the farm bill on the House floor May 18, there was a scramble to bring the farm bill back to the floor before the June 22 deadline to reconsider. The farm bill was not defeated on its merits or the lack thereof; it was used as leverage to force the House leadership to allow members to vote on a comprehensive immigration bill. The hardline immigration bill, which included Rep. Goodlatte's ag worker provisions, was voted on and defeated which cleared the way for reconsideration of the farm bill. House members passed their version farm bill June 22 on a party-line margin of two votes, 213-211. Deep partisan divides in the House continue over SNAP work requirements and several ag policy provisions.

Over in the Senate, it looked like a different political world. Ag Committee chairman Roberts and ranking minority member Stabenow had worked together for several months with committee members and members of their own parties to craft the sections of a bipartisan farm bill capable of broad Senate support. When the committee began markup June 13, the bill passed out of committee in a record three hours on a 20-1 vote; the one dissenting vote was over a procedural issue, not against the farm bill.

Appropriations committees in both the House and Senate continue their progress to pass individual appropriations bills for FY'19 which begins October 1.

Health care is always high on the agenda at the National Grange. The National Grange is partnering with a National opioid crisis action coalition, Rx Abuse Leadership Initiative (RALI), to mobilize local communities and advocacy leaders to actively address our nation's opioid crisis. Also this month, the price of drugs, access to affordable medical care, Medicare, Medicaid, Health and Human Services regulatory authority, opioid legislation, and several more health care issues were in the Grange spotlight.

Rural broadband expansion continues to get priority attention at the Federal Communications Commission, USDA, the White House and from rural members of Congress. That's good news for one of the National Grange's top policy priorities.

Congress is out of Washington the week of July 2 for their annual July 4 recess.

Food and Agriculture

Senate Adopts Farm Bill

Senators passed their bipartisan version of the farm bill June 28 after just two days of floor debate by a wide margin of 86-11. The Senate bill closely follows the structure of the 2014 farm bill. Traditional farm bill amendments to cut subsidies for crop insurance, eliminate the sugar program and revamp the SNAP food assistance programs were not offered on the Senate floor.

An amendment by Thune (R-SD) was adopted to add flexibility for landowners to cut hay and graze livestock on Conservation Reserve Program lands. Included in a package of agreed-upon amendments before final passage, was a measure to allow farmers to change their choice of the Agriculture Risk Coverage and the Price Loss Coverage program in the 2021 crop year. Also included in the agreed-upon package was a National Grange-supported amendment by Grassley (R-IA) to redefine the “actively engaged in farming” rules for commodity subsidy payments. The Grassley amendment tightens the definition of farm management for the purpose of qualifying for commodity programs. Farm operations would be restricted to having one non-farming manager who could qualify for \$125,000 a year in subsidies as a manager. This change is in line with National Grange policy to support family farms that are owned and operated by members of a family who make the management and financial decisions and supply at least part of the labor.

Senate passage clears the way for a Senate-House conference committee to be appointed from both committees’ membership and from Senate and House leadership to resolve section-by-section differences between the two. In some areas, the Senate and House bills are the same or quite similar. In other instances, the bills are sharply different. These difficult differences are SNAP/food assistance rules, commodity program payment limitations, treatment of partnerships and S corporations, and acres in the Conservation Reserve program as examples.

Ag Committee leadership in both House and Senate expect to go to conference following the July 4 recess with the hope of wrapping up a final farm bill package before Congress’ August recess.

Health Care

It’s no secret that the United States is experiencing an epidemic of drug overdose deaths. With 174 people dying each day, drug deaths outnumber lives lost in car accidents or gun-related homicides. While no corner of the nation has gone untouched, the opioid epidemic has hit rural areas particularly hard. Rural and small town America are well aware of the opioid and addictive drug crisis around us. A recent survey by the Farmers Union and Farm Bureau found three of every four farmers and ranchers have been directly impacted by opioids use either personally or by family members, employees, neighbors or someone close in the community.

In many areas, employers report they are desperate to hire new employees. Unfortunately, these same employers consistently report a majority of prospective employees are disqualified because they fail the pre-employment drug test.

States report the opioid-fentanyl-heroin crisis is putting pressure on foster care systems already at or near capacity. The Department of Health and Human Services reports the crisis has struck across racial and generational lines, putting our entire population at risk. The intergenerational group Generations United research shows parental substance abuse is the most common reason grandfamilies come together to raise children who would otherwise go into foster care. Senators Collins (R-ME) and Casey (D-PA) won Senate passage June 21 of their bipartisan bill, Supporting Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Act (S.1091), which would create a one-stop-shop of resources to support grandparents raising grandchildren.

The National Grange has partnered with the Rx Abuse Leadership Initiative (RALI) coalition to work on comprehensive policies that help save lives. RALI partners with state and local community-based organizations to engage policymakers, sponsor print and digital advertisements, provide educational kits, distribute drug disposal kits, and sponsor in-person events. Granges in several target states are RALI partners and several more targeted state Granges are gearing up to participate.

The House overwhelmingly passed broad bipartisan opioid legislation on June 22. The measure combined more than 50 individual bills and focuses on expanding access to treatments, encouraging the development of alternative pain treatments, and curbing the flow of illicit drugs into the U.S. House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Walden (R-OR) deserves much of the credit for this legislative victory. The House opioid package, which has been endorsed by the White House, now heads to the Senate.

Drug and Treatment Affordability

The National Grange and several state Granges cosigned coalition letters and wrote individual letters to Health and Human Services Secretary Azar urging increased HHS oversight of the 340B specialty drug program so that vulnerable or uninsured patients receive outpatient drug discounts the law requires. Similar letters were sent to Secretary Azar expressing support for the patient-popular Medicare Part D program and its ability to ensure access and affordability of treatment for all patients.

Telecommunications

Internet Regulations

Recently, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) overturned a set of regulations promulgated in 2015 that treated the Internet much the same as a 1930's telephone monopoly. As a result of the 2015 actions, broadband deployment slowed to rural communities and small towns. Overturning the 2015 rules should spur renewed interest in rural broadband investment. National Grange president Betsy Huber released a statement complimenting the FCC on its action.

More Broadband Efforts

The FCC plans to fuel another round of rural broadband expansion in July with a \$198 million a year auction to subsidize new service in rural areas. The Connect America Fund Phase II auction is open to rural telcos, electric co-ops, cable operators, price-cap carriers, satellite companies, and fixed wireless providers.

Immigration

Legislation Rejected

The House defeated two major immigration bills in June. The first was a hardline comprehensive reform package that included Representative Goodlatte's (R-VA) ag worker section; it was defeated 193-218. A week later a more narrow compromise bill that provided a pathway to citizenship for Dreamers, ended family separations at the border, ended the diversity lottery system, and funded the border wall was defeated 129-301. Immigration reform is an explosive political issue for vastly different reasons. That's why we haven't been able to accomplish comprehensive immigration since 1986.

Thread of Hope for Ag Worker Bill

Republicans and Democrats from rural and small town areas have been assured a vote on a narrow ag worker immigration bill in July. That's wonderful. However, agriculture isn't holding its breath. The devil's in the details which are still being written and there's a danger the ag worker bill will be held hostage as leverage for another broader immigration bill.

Waters of the United States

A recent district court ruling has suspended the 2015 WOTUS rule in 11 more states bringing the total to 24 states. The Administration has taken public comment on withdrawing the 2015 rule and putting another one in its place. On June 15, EPA and the Corps of Engineers sent their new proposal to the Office of Management and Budget for review but there were no details available to the public.

Psychopaths Anyone?

Psychopaths are described as superficially charming, tend to make good first impressions, and strike observers as remarkably normal. Yet they are self-centered, dishonest, undependable, and largely devoid of guilt, empathy and love, according to a study from Southern Methodist University. So what area of the United States ranks highest in the number of psychopaths in the study? Our nation's capital, Washington, DC.