



NATIONAL GRANGE

OF THE ORDER OF PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY

American Values. Hometown Roots.

View from the Hill



POLICY UPDATES and ISSUE NEWS

MAY 2020 WRAP-UP

HEROES

The coronavirus pandemic has reminded new generations of Americans just how critical and how basic medical care and agriculture are to our very survival. We are so grateful to the doctors, nurses, technicians, first responders, researchers, laboratories and so many more, and we're reminded how fortunate we are to live among these heroes who think of others first. These were the first wave of "critical" personnel designations. As the pandemic surrounded us, our first thought was of course about medical care. But then our second thought was about food.

The second wave of "critical" personnel designations were the food chain workers who continue in overdrive to make sure we have the food we need. Farmers, ranchers and field workers keep producing food while suffering devastating economic losses. As traditional markets disappeared, many producers are able to deliver directly to families. Others are donating their unmarketable commodities directly to food banks and community kitchens. Processing plant workers continue to do their job in close proximity at high risk. Truck drivers haul commodities from the farm and food to the stores, driving longer non-stop hours on the road passing closed restaurants and barricaded rest stops. Store clerks stock shelves and service customers putting themselves at risk. Food pantry staffs assemble boxes of staples and hand them out to long lines of those in need. So here's a big thank you shout-out to the men and women who keep America's food chain running.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

Coronavirus Payments to Farmers and Ranchers

Sign-up for USDA's Coronavirus Food Assistance Program (CFAP) funds authorized by Congress in its Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Stability Act (CARES-1) stimulus package began May 26 at local Farm Service Agency (FSA) offices nationwide. These monies are to compensate farmers and ranchers for losses due to severe price declines between January 15 and April 15, 2020. Payments will be available to producers of dairy, livestock, specialty crops (fruits and vegetables), and certain other crops (malting barley, canola corn, upland cotton, oats, millet, soybeans, sorghum, sunflowers, wheat and wool) on inventory subject to price risk held as of January 15.

Meat Processing Plants Partly Open

One of the biggest challenges in the food supply chain the past two months has been meat processing plant closures. Most of these are large facilities employing thousands of workers in a single location working in close proximity to each other. As COVID-19 spread into rural areas, workers became infected, plants closed for retrofitting and sanitization, and meat supplies became scarce at the consumer level. At the same time, animal supplies backed up at the farm level creating an economic crisis of greatly depressed prices for the producer. As of the end of Memorial Day, most plants were back in at least partial operation and retail shelves were restocked with higher priced meat. An unfortunate challenge has been the procurement of large

numbers of scarce tests and supplies of personal protective equipment for food chain workers. Tests and supplies went first, as they should have, to hospitals and health care workers then next to the food and ag sector. Then, because of competition for tests and PPE from non-critical infrastructure sectors, the FDA and USDA issued an order just before Memorial Day that food and agriculture are to be given emergency priority.

Demand Surges at Small Plants

As large meat processing plants reduced processing capacity, the demand at small local custom processing plants soared. Consumer demand to fill their freezers has caused these local meat shops to be booked ahead from several months to a year.

Local Food Systems More Popular

When the food supply chain first broke down, farm prices tanked, milk was dumped and vegetables were plowed under. At the same time, interest in community-supported agriculture farms rose dramatically. These farms, known as CSAs, sell consumers subscriptions to their farm's produce before the harvest comes in. Customers get weekly or biweekly deliveries at open-air pickup points or directly at the farm.

Farm Surplus to Needy Families

Using funds from Congress' \$19 billion coronavirus relief plan, USDA rolled out its "Farm to Families Food Box" never-before- tried plan in record time. The Department will use commercial companies and organizations to buy fresh produce, dairy products and meat to give to needy families across the country. Food is packed into household size boxes and trucked directly to distribution sites including schools and nonprofits.

More Funds for Feeding Programs

In addition to funds authorized by Congress for feeding programs and food banks, USDA will use its Section 32 authority (funds from Customs duties) to purchase \$470 million worth of potatoes, dairy foods, chicken, pork, seafood, cherries, pears, asparagus, strawberries, turkey, prunes and raisins. This is on top of USDA's budgeted Section 32 purchases for the year. These commodities will go to feeding programs (SNAP, Women, Infants & Children, etc.) and food banks.

Rural Children Get Five Million Meals a Week

A public-private partnership is now serving five times the number of meals per week it initially projected to feed low-income kids in rural areas. USDA's Meals to You initiative has been greatly expanded with expertise and help from Baylor University, McLane Global and PepsiCo. Meals to You boxes contain 20 meals to cover the amount of food a child normally receives at school over two school weeks. Boxes are delivered directly to the child's doorstep by the U.S. Postal Service and other delivery services.

FDA and USDA Prepare for Peak Harvest Season

FDA and USDA will cooperate and coordinate regulations to facilitate food supplies movement through the food chain and assure consumers have access to a safe and robust food supply. To prevent bottlenecks and back-ups, USDA will use its authority under the Defense Production Act to assume some of FDA's statutory duties to regulate facilities that manufacture, process, pack, hold, grow or harvest foods.

ECONOMIC CRISIS RESPONSE

HEROES Act Passes House

In response to the economic crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic, the House of Representatives passed a \$3.2 billion CARES-2 coronavirus relief package termed the HEROES Act in mid-May. Provisions in HEROES include:

- Fiscal relief for local and state governments
- Rent and mortgage assistance
- Authorization for a new round of stimulus checks for individuals and families
- Extension of unemployment benefits
- Help for workers to obtain testing and PPP equipment
- More broadband deployment targeted to rural, low-income and vulnerable communities
- Additional funds for testing, tracing and treatment
- U.S. Postal Service operating funds
- Additional feeding programs funding
- Funds to cover payments to biofuel plants, local agriculture and additional payments to farmers and ranchers to cover losses in the second quarter of this year (current CARES-1 payments cover only January 15-April 15).
- Expansion of the Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) to nonprofits like the Grange and extends PPP loan forgiveness to 24 weeks.

The Senate will consider its own new relief package in June after it assesses the successes and failures from the first CARES-1 stimulus funds.

Grants and Loans for Agribusiness

The Small Business Administration has extended eligibility for grants and low-interest, long-term loans to small agribusinesses. This reverses a 30 year prohibition preventing SBA from providing disaster assistance to agricultural businesses.

Rural Businesses Eligible for USDA Loan Guarantees

USDA is making \$1 billion in loan guarantees available to support rural businesses, including producers, with working capital to respond to the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. The program is specifically available to rural businesses and producers who do not qualify for Farm Service Agency loans.

HEALTH CARE

Rural Health Support Needed

As the Hill prepared to write various coronavirus relief packages, the National Grange and several rural organizations called on the Senate and House leadership and the Congressional Rural caucus to consider several urgent rural issues, including:

- Increase Medicare payments to rural hospitals and clinics
- Allow for 90-day refills on critical prescription drugs
- Protect air medical services to transport patients between rural areas and Tier I and II trauma centers
- Address out-of-network billing for the duration of the pandemic and a reasonable recovery period afterwards
- Expedite broadband emergency and short term deployment to unserved and underserved areas
- Fund the Postal Service as necessary to meet rural delivery demands stemming from the pandemic.

Rural Health Care Providers Get Emergency Funds

The Department of Health and Human Services is distributing \$10 billion to rural hospitals and clinics responding to patients with COVID-19. Nearly half the rural hospitals across the country were struggling financially before the pandemic. Many have had to close because healthy patients delayed care and hospitals canceled elective surgeries.

Treating Pain Sensibly

The National Grange and a large group of patient advocate organizations wrote the Food and Drug Administration and the National Institutes of Health to continue priority development of individualized approaches for treating pain and to concentrate in particular on non-addictive options. The letter pointed out that pain from migraines, endometriosis, osteoarthritis, lower back pain, acute injuries and surgeries are all different, and each type of pain may require different medicines and treatment plans.

Grange Applauds Innovative Cancer Treatment Approval

The National Grange issued a statement thanking the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid for approving a rule change that allows patients undergoing innovative cancer treatment known as CAR-T to receive reimbursement and have their treatment closer to home. The National Grange and state Granges in Kansas, North Carolina, Oklahoma and Ohio had called on CMS to certify treatment in facilities other than in a few major metropolitan centers which created significant hurdles for rural individuals

POST OFFICE CHALLENGES

The United States Postal Service is in the middle of a public policy controversy: continue to depend upon federal government loans and grants for operating expenses, or raise fees, reduce service, improve performance and retool management? The Postal Service's accumulated operating debt is huge at \$160.9 billion, and the CARES-1 relief package increased its borrowing authority from the Treasury Department by \$10 billion. The HEROES Act Passed by the House gives the Postal Service \$25 billion in financial relief but its fate is uncertain in the Senate. Grangers, especially in rural areas during the pandemic, are fortunate to have the "essential service" mail man bring food, prescription drugs, clothes, supplies, notices, business staples, distance learning materials and much more. The Grange certainly will be engaged in future policy discussions about revamping and revitalizing the Postal Service. For now, the National Grange is asking Congress to fund the USPS as necessary to continue its current level of service through the coronavirus pandemic and for a reasonable recovery period afterward.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Tougher on Robocalls

The telecommunications industry is working collaboratively across wireline, wireless, VoIP and cable companies to actively trace and identify the source of illegal robocalls through its Industry Traceback Group. The ITG also coordinates with federal and state agencies to identify non-cooperative providers for enforcement action. In addition, the Federal Communications Commission will no longer warn illegal robocallers before issuing penalties for violating the law.

Broadband in TV White Space

Thirty four organizations joined the National Grange to support Federal Communications Commission rulemaking to bridge the digital divide. The comments filed with the FCC supported updating unlicensed TV white space rules to clear regulatory barriers and maximize spectrum resources. The updated rules will enhance the use of hybrid networks for broadband deployment to rural areas.

Hill Hearing Focuses on Broadband Amid Pandemic

National Grange President Betsy Huber issued a statement of support to the Senate Commerce Committee for holding the hearing on "The State of Broadband amid the COVID-19 Pandemic." The Grange supports longer term solutions for high speed broadband deployment into unserved and underserved rural areas, but emphasizes the critical need for emergency short term connectivity such as community hot spots and hybrid networks in preparation for this coming fall and winter demand for critical distance learning and telemedicine.

PERPESPECTIVES

- “ *The glory of gardening: hands in the dirt, head in the sun, heart with nature. To nurture a garden is to feed not just the body but the soul.* ~ **Alfred Austin** ”
- “ *Remember that children, marriages and flower gardens reflect the kind of care they get.* ~ **M. Jackson Brown Jr.** ”
- “ *A weed is a plant that has mastered every survival skill except for learning how to grow in rows.* ~ **Doug Larson** ”
- “ *Digging potatoes is always an adventure, somewhat like fishing. There is forever the possibility that the next cast – or the next thrust of the digging fork – will turn up a clunker.* ~ **Jerome Belanger** ”
- “ *Everything that slows us down and forces patience, everything that sets us back in the slow circles of nature, is a help. Gardening is an instrument of grace.* ~ **May Sarton** ”
- “ *It is difficult to think anything but pleasant thoughts while eating a homegrown tomato.* ~ **Lewis Grizzard** ”