



Washington Week Ahead: Perdue heads to Hill amid farm bill, trade questions

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February 24, 2019

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue heads to Capitol Hill this week to face lawmakers eager to hear about progress on the Trump administration's trade disputes and implementation of the farm bill.

President Donald Trump, meanwhile, says he's nearing a deal to settle his trade dispute with China after the latest round of negotiations continued into the weekend. He announced Sunday that he was extending his March 1 deadline for China to reach an agreement or face additional tariffs. "If all works well, we're going to have some very big news over the next week or two," Trump said Sunday night at a dinner with the nation's governors.

The Agriculture Department will hold its first listening session on the new farm bill on Tuesday ahead of Perdue's appearances before the House Agriculture Committee on Wednesday and the Senate Agriculture Committee on Thursday.

On Friday, Perdue will be in Orlando, Fla., to speak at the Commodity Classic, the annual meeting of corn, sorghum, wheat and soybean producers.

He will also speak in Washington this week to annual meetings of the National Association of State Departments of Agriculture and the School Nutrition Association.

The Senate, meanwhile, this week could take up the nomination of Andrew Wheeler as administrator of the EPA, a position he has been filling on an acting basis since Scott Pruitt resigned in July. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., teed up consideration of the Wheeler nomination by filling cloture on it ahead of last week's congressional recess.

The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved Wheeler's nomination on a party-line 11-10 vote Feb. 5, and no Democrats other than Joe Manchin III of West Virginia are likely to support him on the floor either. Manchin was the sole Democrat who voted for Wheeler's nomination as acting administrator who is still in the Senate.

USDA officials have yet to provide a timeline for implementing changes to farm bill programs or to even say when farmers will be allowed to change their selection of the main commodity programs for row crops, Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage, or when dairy producers will be allowed to sign up for the new Dairy Margin Coverage program, an overhaul of the old Margin Protection Program intended to keep smaller scale operations in business.

"There are a lot of moving pieces coming together" in the implementation process, said Bill Northey, USDA's undersecretary for farm production and conservation programs.

Tuesday's all-day listening session is intended to provide the Farm Service Agency, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Risk Management Agency input on how commodity and conservation programs and crop insurance should operate under the new farm bill. Much of the comment is expected to focus on conservation programs, where the most substantive changes were made.

"We have to understand Congress' intent, and we have to understand how" the programs are "best delivered," said Northey. "It might be different for somebody who's looking at a conservation project in Vermont versus Arizona, and we need to be able to hear those suggestions to make sure that the rules are written in a way that works."

The agencies posed a series of specific questions on which they wanted input. NRCS asked, for example, how it should use its programs to support precision agriculture. RMA asked how cover crop use has affected insurability or claim determinations.

Northey declined to provide estimates on when the PLC, ARC and DMC sign-ups would occur. In the case of the dairy program, however, USDA officials believe struggling farms need to start receiving DMC payments as quickly as possible, he said.

The new program, like MPP, triggers payments when the difference between milk prices and feed prices falls below the margin coverage elected by the producer. Under DMC, producers can buy coverage up to \$9.50 per hundredweight, compared to a maximum of \$8 under MPP. The higher coverage levels took effect Jan. 1, but producers can't get payments until they sign up for the new program.

Producers are "covered now, but we need to have a signup so that we can get the checks out," said Northey.

Farm groups worried that lawmakers don't understand the importance of immigration to farms around the country have organized briefings next Tuesday on Capitol Hill to brief congressional staff on the issue.

The Ag Labor Summit was the brainchild of former California GOP Rep. George Radanovich. The speakers will include Senate Agriculture Chairman Pat Roberts, R-Kan.; Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., Rep. Ted Yoho, R-Fla.; the chief U.S. agricultural trade negotiator, Gregg Doud; and USDA's special adviser on immigration policy, Kristi Boswell. The congressional aides also will hear from experts such as ag labor lawyer Lynn Jacquez, Tim Kane of the Hoover Institute and Theresa Cardinal Brown of the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Here is a list of agriculture- or rural-related events scheduled for this week in Washington and elsewhere:

Monday, Feb. 25

National Anti-Hunger Policy Conference, through Tuesday, Omni Shoreham.

National Association of State Departments of Agriculture winter policy meeting, through Wednesday, Arlington, Va.

School Nutrition Association, annual legislative action conference, through Tuesday, Marriott Marquis.

Tuesday, Feb. 26

All day — USDA farm bill listening session, Jefferson Auditorium.

10 a.m. — House Commerce-Justice-Science Appropriations Subcommittee hearing on climate research, H-309 Capitol.

10 a.m. — House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hearing on federal infrastructure and climate change mitigation and adaptation, HVC-10 Capitol.

10:30 a.m. — House Energy and Commerce subcommittee hearing on EPA's enforcement program, 2322 Rayburn.

Wednesday, Feb. 27

Commodity Classic, through Saturday, Orlando, Fla.

10 a.m. — House Agriculture Committee hearing with Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue, 1300 Longworth.

10 a.m. — House State-Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee hearing with USAID Administrator Mark Green, 2359 Rayburn.

10 a.m. — House Ways and Means Committee hearing on U.S.-China trade, 1100 Longworth.

2 p.m. — American Enterprise Institute forum, “Does Brexit Matter?” 1789 Massachusetts Avenue NW.

2 p.m. — House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee hearing with FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, 2362-A Rayburn.

Thursday, Feb. 28

8:30 a.m. — USDA releases Weekly Export Sales report.

9:30 a.m. — Senate Agriculture Committee hearing with Agriculture Secretary Perdue, 328A Russell.

4 p.m. — Cato Institute forum, “Big Fat Nutrition Policy,” with Nina Teicholz, author of “The Big Fat Surprise: Why Butter, Meat and Cheese Belong in a Healthy Diet,” and director of the Nutrition Coalition.

Friday, March 1

8:30 a.m. — Washington International Trade Association forum on the 2019 congressional trade agenda, Ronald Reagan Building.

Secretary Perdue speaks at Commodity Classic.