

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**November 29, 1999**

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LAST WEEK

YEAR END BUDGET DEBATE COMES TO A CLOSE – With lawmakers scrambling to get out of town several weeks beyond the scheduled adjournment, Congress passed an omnibus appropriations bill on Friday, H.R. 3194. The bill supercedes four separate appropriations bills, which were rolled into the text of H.R. 3194, following the passage of nine continuing resolutions. The Bill also contains emergency assistance associated with Hurricane Floyd and other natural disasters. Included in this funding is \$80 million for the NRCS Emergency Watershed Protection (EWP) Program. To offset this spending and meet other budgetary requirements, the legislation also call for a government-wide across the board spending reduction of .38 percent. Departments have the option of exempting appropriations from the reductions, however no single appropriation may be reduced by more than 15 percent.

SWEARING IN OF JOE BACA (D-CA) AS A NEW MEMBER OF THE HOUSE – On Thursday, November 18, 1999, Joe Baca was sworn in to fill the vacant seat of California's 42nd Congressional District. Baca, 52, succeeds the late George Brown who died on July 15. He has been assigned to the House Agriculture Committee as well as the House Science Committee.

THIS WEEK

106TH CONGRESS, 1ST SESSION COMES TO A CLOSE - Following legislative business on Monday, the 1st Session of the 106th Congress was adjourned. Members are not scheduled to return for business until January 24th at 12:00 noon.

SUMMARY OF SESSION – Several legislative initiatives of interest to conservation were introduced during the course of 1999. A summary of some of these, and their status in the legislative process is as follows:

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) Reauthorization - Two pieces of legislation were introduced to reauthorize WRP. In the Senate, S.1448 was introduced by Sen. Tim Hutchinson (R-AR). The bill would allow for the annual enrolment of 250,000 acres into the program until the year 2005. The bill has 16 cosponsors. On the House side, H.R. 2066, introduced by Rep. Chip Pickering (R-MS) contains nearly identical provisions as the Senate bill. The Pickering legislation has 39 cosponsors. Neither bill has received a hearing or markup by the agriculture committees.

Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) Reauthorization – With the cap of 36.4 million acres mandated by law in sight, some Members have initiated legislation to reauthorize the CRP. On the House side, Rep. Collin Peterson (D-MN) introduced H.R. 408, which would provide for 45 million acres in the Conservation Reserve. The legislation enjoys the bipartisan support of 64 cosponsors, and also received a hearing by the House Agriculture Subcommittee on General Farm Commodities, Resource Conservation, and Research on July 22, 1999.

Crop Insurance/Risk Management - During the first session, the House passed H.R. 2559, the “The Agricultural Risk Protection Act”. The goals of the bill are to provide better coverage at a lower cost; provide more coverage flexibility; and reward responsible producers. The Senate is expected to take up this issue in 2000. Proposals for risk management legislation have contained provisions that call for conservation practices such as integrated pest management, nutrient management, conservation tillage, conservation buffers, water quantity management, and many others. Also investment in capital improvement, such as watersheds, windbreaks, and irrigation improvement, could all be potential inclusions.

Aging Watershed Legislation, During the course of the first session, two pieces of legislation began moving through Congress. Rep. Frank Lucas (R-OK) introduced H.R. 728. The bill would provide for \$60 million annually for the rehabilitation of aging dams. The bill has 55 cosponsors and received numerous hearings from Congressional Committees. On October 27, 1999, the House Agriculture Committee marked-up and reported the legislation favorably. On November 18, 1999 the House Transportation and Infrastructure committee did the same. The bill may see floor action the House of Representatives at the beginning of 2000. On the Senate side, S. 1762 was introduced by Sen. Paul Coverdell (R-GA) and Sen. Blanche Lincoln (D-AR).

Farmland Protection Program (FPP) Reauthorization Two pieces of legislation were introduced this year. S.333 introduced by Senator Pat Leahy (D-VT) would reauthorize the program at \$55 million per year and make other changes to the authorizing language. The bill has 23 cosponsors and the Senate Agriculture Committee held a hearing on the subject on July 21,

1999. In the House, Rep. Sam Farr introduced H.R. 1950, which is virtually identical to the Senate legislation. That bill has 15 cosponsors.

Other Legislative Initiatives

Stenholm Legislation, H.R. 2793 – This bill seeks to place USDA in the leading role with respect to agricultural water quality. The legislation provides additional tools with respect to assistance to landowners, including utilization of section 208j of the Clean Water Act. In addition, Stenholm’s amendment to H.R. 728 dealing with privacy of Conservation data could also be incorporated.

Harkin “Conservation Security Act” S. 1426 – S. 1426 legislation would provide for “green payments” to producers who fulfill the provision of a Conservation Plan.

NRCS Legislative Affairs staff will continue to track these and other bills and report on them as the 2ⁿd session begins. However, more information can always be found by logging on to the Library of Congress legislative resource homepage at:
<http://Thomas.loc.gov/>

WEEKLY SUMMARY STATUS – The NRCS Weekly Legislative Summary will resume when Congress reconvenes in January, 2000. Happy Holidays.

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