

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:

September 22, 1997

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LAST WEEK:

CONFERENCE COMMITTEE PASSES REPORT ON FY98

AGRICULTURE APPROPRIATIONS - On Wednesday afternoon, House and Senate conferees met and quickly passed the committee report on the FY98 Agriculture Appropriations bill. The measure is now cleared for floor action in both chambers, which will likely occur within a few days. The conference report contains the compromises that resolve the differences between the House and Senate versions of their respective appropriations bills. Those items for NRCS include:

Conservation Operations - set at \$633,231,000, which is approximately \$13 million more than FY97 and \$23 million more than the House mark. The conference remained silent on several provisions included in the House report language, however, there was an additional \$850,000 in earmarks added to CO by the conferees.

Watershed Surveys and Planning - set at \$11,190,000 which is approximately \$1 million less than FY97.

Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations - set at \$101,036,000 which is the same as last year. The conference accepted a House provision which restricted technical assistance from this account to \$50 million and a Senate provision which directs \$15 million of these funds be used for P.L. 534 projects.

Resource Conservation and Development - set at \$34,377,000 which is \$5 million more than FY97. The conference report states that the conferees expect the increase to be used to fund RC&D areas waiting to be funded.

Forest Incentives Program - set at \$6,325,000 which is the same level as last year.

Outreach for Socially Disadvantaged Farmers Program - set at \$3,000,000 which is \$2 million over last year. The conferees also added that the Administration provided \$4.5 million additional to this program through the Fund for Rural America.

CCC Funded Programs - There were no restrictions place on any of the mandatory accounts funded through the Commodity Credit Corporation. As a result, EQIP, WRP, WHIP, Farmland Protection Program, and the Conservation Farm Option Program will be able to utilize CCC funds up to their authorized level.

AIR QUALITY HEARING - The House Agriculture Committee (Chairman Smith, R-OR) held a hearing on the potential impact of new EPA air quality standards on September 16th. Witnesses included Representative, Ron Klink (D-PA); EPA Administrator Carol Browner; and Dr. Calvin Parnell, who serves on the USDA Air Quality Task Force. Chairman Smith reiterated his concerns that new regulations will have unpredictable negative impacts on production agriculture. He stressed that practices such as agricultural burning might face future regulation as a result of the EPA standards. Administrator Browner said that agriculture is not the target of the proposed regulations. She stated that the EPA will not regulate tilling practices, agricultural burning, or the emissions from farm machinery. She also stated that agriculture is a minor contributor of finite particulate matter into the air. Members of the committee challenged that the EPA has no way of ensuring that states will not regulate agriculture as a result of the standards. Rep. Charlie Stenholm (D-TX) cited a report that claims that agriculture is a significant contributor of air pollution.

He also added that the cost-benefit analysis of the proposed regulations do not accurately reflect the increased utility costs that farmers will incur.

BIPARTISAN BILL INTRODUCED TO REAUTHORIZE ESA - A bill that would reauthorize the Endangered Species Act, S. 1180, was introduced on Tuesday. Although the Administration has not yet taken a position on the bill, Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt pointed out that the bill codifies a number of administrative reforms that the Departments of Commerce and Interior have developed over the last several years. These provisions include:

- a multi-species approach - provides for multi-species recovery and conservation plans, and takes other steps to encourage a multi-species approach to conservation.
- certainty for landowners - codifies reforms to provide certainty for landowners in conservation planning.
- removing disincentives - incorporating the Administration's "Safe Harbor" policy that is designed to encourage landowners to take active steps to improve or enhance wildlife habitat. The legislation also removes disincentives associated with attracting additional endangered species to their property.
- open the process - especially recovery planning - to the public, and increases the role of States as important partners in endangered species conservation.
- preventing species from becoming endangered - includes provision to allow the departments to reach agreements that get ahead of the curve and preclude the need to list candidate and proposed species.

The measure is sponsored by Senators John Chaffe (R-RI), Baucus (D-MT), Dirk Kempthorne (R-ID), and Harry Reid (D-NV). The first hearing on S. 1180 is scheduled for September 23.

LEGISLATION OF NOTE-

The following bills of significance to NRCS and conservation were recently introduced:

Bill	Member	Purpose
H.R. 2446	Shuster (PA)	Amends federal policy toward disaster relief.
S. 1180	Chafee et al.	Reauthorizes and amends the Endangered Species Act

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THIS WEEK:

FINAL PASSAGE OF FY98 AGRICULTURE APPROPRIATIONS - On Tuesday, September 23, the House plans to consider a number of bills under suspension of the rules and the conference report on the Agriculture Appropriations bill, H.R. 2160. The Senate is also expected to take up the conference report this week.

ENDANGERED SPECIES RECOVERY ACT. - The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee (Chairman John Chafee, R-RI) will hold a hearing on legislation, S. 1180, that would overhaul the law that seeks to ensure the survival of threatened and endangered species.

Sept. 23 9:30 a.m. 406 Dirksen Bldg.

AMERICAN HERITAGE RIVERS - The House Resources Committee (Chairman Don Young, AK) will hold a hearing on H.R. 1842 sponsored by Helen Chenoweth R-ID. H.R. 1842 would prohibit the use of any appropriated funds from being used to carry out the American Heritage River Initiative.

Sept. 24 11:00 a.m. 1324 Longworth Bldg.

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LOOKING AHEAD:

FIRE AS A MANAGEMENT TOOL - The House Resources Committee (Chairman Young, R-AK) will hold a hearing on the impact of setting fires to manage federal forests and allowing natural fires to burn. The panel also will examine if such fires would violate air quality standards set by the Environmental Protection Agency and how those standards affect the use of fire as a forest management tool. Witnesses scheduled to attend include EPA Administrator, Carol Browner; USDA Secretary, Dan Glickman; and Interior Secretary, Bruce Babbitt.

Sept. 30 11:00 am 1324 Longworth Bldg.

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