

LEGISLATIVE SUMMARY FOR:**March 9, 1998**

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LAST WEEK:

YEAR 2000 - The Department Operations, Nutrition and Foreign Agriculture Subcommittee (Chairman Bob Goodlatte, R-Virginia) of the House Agriculture Committee held a hearing, marked up legislation, and then passed out of committee by voice vote H.R. 3280. The bill would require USDA to create a new office to oversee information technology and reforms information technology procurement at USDA. The new office would be charged with correcting the 'year 2000' problem. The office would be funded with money from the agencies within the Department. The Chief Information Officer would head the agency, report directly to the Secretary of Agriculture and serve as vice chairman of the agency's information technology review board.

EQIP HEARING - The House Agriculture Subcommittee on Forestry, Resource Conservation, and Research (Chairman Larry Combest R-TX) held the first oversight hearing on the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). Craig Cox, Acting Deputy Under Secretary for NRE, was the principle USDA witness. Chairman Combest made it clear in his opening remarks that it was imperative that NRCS and Congress be able to tell the public the benefits of the program and how EQIP addresses the needs of farmers and ranchers to deal with the environmental issues they face. Congressional interest in EQIP was high, with 18 members attending at least a portion of the hearing, including the ranking committee member. Statements from members indicate strong support for the program. Their questions focused on understanding priority areas, the role of state technical committees and the locally-led process. They found this concept to be quite different than their understanding of CRP and previous agricultural programs.

Mr. Cox began his testimony with an oral statement highlighting the numerous conservation accomplishments of the last two years, including: nearly 2 million conservation plans to ensure producers could participate in the AMTA program; helped nearly 240,000 producers develop bids for CRP in the 15th and 16th sign-ups; launch a nation-wide buffer initiative through a number of initiatives, such as CRP where nearly 536,000 acres or 150,000 miles of buffers have been enrolled to date; delivered disaster assistance to over 400 counties in 47 states plus Puerto Rico and the Pacific Basin; and helped almost 60,000 producers apply for EQIP and wrote over 23,000 conservation plans and contracts for producers that were selected to participate in the program. Mr. Cox's written testimony can be reviewed on the NRCS Legislative Affairs homepage.

HEARING ON GLOBAL WARMING TREATY - On Thursday, the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee (Chairman Richard Lugar, R-IN) conducted a hearing on the Kyoto Global Warming Pact that would require a reduction in emissions of carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse" gases that are believed to cause global warming. Chairman Lugar opened the meeting by providing background on the Kyoto Agreement and the issue of global warming. He highlighted statistics that show evidence of air quality problems around the globe. He called upon the administration to establish an interagency

Energy and Environmental Security Task Force, of which USDA would take part. Stuart Eizenstat, Undersecretary of State for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs stated that the agreement signed in Kyoto was a much needed effort to address a worsening environmental concern. He said that the science is well documented and that the targets for emission reduction that the compact sets are a needed first step toward correcting the problem.

Deputy Secretary of Agriculture, Richard Rominger opened his remarks by stating that climate change is a very important issue for agricultural and forest production. He stated that enactment of the Kyoto targets would have a modest negative impact upon agriculture producers. However, the Deputy also outlined many possible opportunities and roles for agriculture in helping the U.S. meet the targets that are contained in the agreement. He noted that the Kyoto agreement provides for many greenhouse gas mitigation techniques. Among these, carbon sequestration through enhanced reforestation could be a possible aid toward implementing the agreement. He also noted that many soil conservation practices lead to carbon sequestration. He highlighted the Conservation Reserve program (CRP), Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) and Conservation Buffer Initiative as examples of programs that could play a direct role in reducing greenhouse gas levels through increased biomass. Dean R. Kleckner, President of the American Farm Bureau Federation said that he was very concerned that the interests of farmers and ranchers have not been represented in the debate over global climate change. He also stated that the Kyoto agreement would result in many new regulations and higher production costs for agriculture. Overall, he stated that more science is needed to support major policy decisions in this area.

LEGISLATION OF NOTE-

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

Bill	Member	Purpose
S. 1677	Chaffee (RI)	Would reauthorize the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and the Partnerships for Wildlife Act.
H.R. 3339	Paul (TX)	Would amend AMTA to ensure that rice farms covered by a production flexibility contract remain in rice production.

THIS WEEK:

WHIP BRIEFING - Deputy Chief Larry Clark and Leslie Deavers of the NRCS Watersheds and Wetlands Division will conduct a briefing for the House Agriculture Committee on the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP).

March 9 2:00 p.m. 1300 Longworth Bldg.
