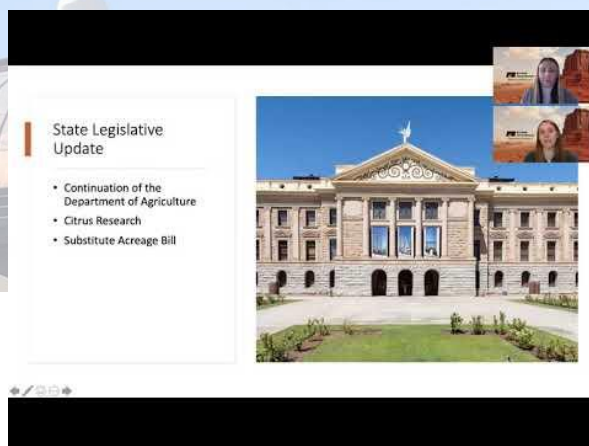


While You Were Working

A PUBLICATION OF THE ARIZONA FARM BUREAU GOVERNMENT RELATIONS TEAM

Click here to watch a short video update from your GR Team! (Video will open in a new screen.)



Stimulus: It's Not Just for COVID Anymore

Chelsea McGuire, Government Relations Director

On Thursday, the United States House Agriculture Committee voted to advance the latest round of financial stimulus for the agricultural industry.

The \$16.1 billion package approved by the committee is significantly different from the last two rounds of stimulus. That's understandable, since this is the first round of COVID-related stimulus that Congress has debated under the Biden Administration. As a result, both the content and the processes are significantly different than the last time(s) around.

In short, the stimulus package no longer has COVID relief as its sole aim; at its core this is a budget rather than an economic relief package. It still has \$4 billion in aid targeted at the food supply chain, the vast majority of which will go to purchase and distribute agricultural commodities. Of those funds, \$100 million will be provided to overtime fee relief to small meat and poultry processors who are experiencing COVID-19-related backlogs. It also extends a 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits. But the provision receiving the most attention is a program through which socially disadvantaged farmers will be eligible for payments worth 120 percent of their debt on USDA farm loans.

These payments are specifically intended to increase the number of Black farmers, who currently make up only 1 percent of producers nationwide.

Although House Democrats had been working with their Senate counterparts while drafting the bill, there was apparently no outreach across the aisle to Republican members of the committee. Committee Republicans were in the dark until the final package was released. With Democrats blocking almost every proposed amendment, they also argue they had no meaningful opportunity to influence the terms of the bill. While Democrats point to the bill's minority debt relief provisions as necessary to address key goals for strengthening the ag economy, Republicans argue that the package is the wrong program at the wrong time, falling short of the relief that agriculture needs.

The vote to advance the package through committee was a straight party line, 25-23. In the next week, we the package will be rolled into the broader COVID stimulus bill, which currently carries a price tag of just under \$2 trillion dollars. It is expected that the budget package will be passed through Congress by the first week of March. We will continue to track the progress of this measure, and any changes to its provisions, as it works through the process.

State Legislature Continues at Breakneck Speed

After introducing a record 1707 bills, 33 days into what we thought would be a halting, stop-and-go kind of legislation session, the chambers have not only proceeded with almost no appreciable COVID-related delays, they have also cranked out a volume of work that is rarely seen by this point in the year.

With no committees meeting on Thursdays, the House has been having marathon floor sessions where they will vote on dozens of bills. Last week, they cranked through more than 80 bills in one day. Yesterday, they put up similarly impressive numbers. While the Senate has been moving with a little less urgency, it's by no means stagnant. Combined, the two chambers have already sent 29 bills to the Governor's desk and are well on their way to exceeding everyone's expectations for the volume of legislation that will be passed this session.

Things aren't looking to slow down any time soon. Next week is the last week for bills to be heard in committees in their chamber of origin. That means that if a bill is not assigned to and heard by a committee by next week, it is dead in the water (there are ways of resurrecting bills, but we'll talk about Zombie Bills later). As a result, Crossover Week, as it has come to be known, is always a flurry of activity and last-minute committee agenda changes. And we are already busy working several of Farm Bureau's key bills:

- S1224/H2673: Agriculture Nuisance: this bill is one of our top priorities of the year. The purpose is to protect agricultural operations from frivolous lawsuits by limiting the plaintiffs who may bring a suit for "nuisance." We are still working with our friends and allies in the agricultural industry to draft an amendment to address concerns about the language, but will be moving the bill through committee this week.
- H2525: Egg-Laying Hens; Confinement: yes, it's back again. This bill would require that all eggs sold and produced in Arizona be from cage-free hens. Readers from last year will remember the work that we did to prevent this bill from passing last year. Rest assured, we are employing a similar strategy this year and will do all we can to prevent it from becoming law.
- H2691: Surface Water Protection (strike-everything amendment): the keynote bill from last week's newsletter was held from its committee agenda this week after numerous stakeholders expressed concerns. We are still waiting on the final language to assess the changes that might be made to the bill, but it's back on a committee agenda for Tuesday. We will keep a close eye on it and update you as soon as we know more.

Bills from This Week		
Bill	Explanation	Status
H2056/S1368: Water Conservation; No Forfeiture (Rep. Griffin/Sen. Kerr)	Allows farmer to file a conservation plan with the Department in order to avoid losing rights to surface water not used due to conservation practices	Passed House & Senate; Ready for Governor
H2081/S1448: AZDA Continuation (Rep. Dunn/Sen. Kerr)	Continues the Department of Agriculture for eight years.	Passed House 58-1; Ready for Senate
H2441: Substitute Acres (Rep. Griffin)	Allows permanent retirement water from damaged acres and substitution of those acres on the same contiguous farming unit.	Passed House 34-24; Ready for Senate