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OUR VIEW

Omnibus bill a home run for U.S. agriculture

With the start of the baseball season, it's time to take a swing at the recently passed Omnibus Spending Bill with the help of our collection of metaphors related to the national pastime.

Overall, Congress hit a home run with the Omnibus bill, which included dozens of sections related to all sorts of issues. Not only did Congress avert another federal government shutdown with the bill, it also scored big against five problems plaguing the nation's farmers and ranchers.

The first save related to last December, when Congress struck out in its tax cut bill. In that bill, tax deductions were granted to farmers who sold their crops to cooperatives but not to those who sold commodities to independent buyers. This threatened the wellbeing of privately owned grain elevators around the U.S.

In the Omnibus bill, Congress called a foul ball and dropped the deduction advantage.



Ted S. Warren/Associated Press

Seattle Mariners and Cleveland Indians players and coaches line the baselines during the National Anthem on opening day in Seattle. Congress gave farmers and ranchers a 5-0 victory in the Omnibus Spending Bill.

The second save for Congress in the Omnibus bill tosses out a federal judge's ruling that required many farmers and ranchers to report manure emissions to the Coast Guard. The Environmental Protection Agency had exempted them from filing reports under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and

Liability Act. That act was aimed at industrial chemical companies and others that in an accident may emit exotic and poisonous gases into the air, but an environmental group convinced a federal judge that it should apply to cow pies as well.

Under the Omnibus bill, that judge and the environmental

group were sent to the showers, and livestock owners will again be exempted from manure reports.

The Omnibus bill also produced a double play on another livestock concern, albeit temporarily. The U.S. Department of Transportation has been requiring truckers to use electronic logging devices and limiting the number of hours they can drive. That's fine, except drivers hauling livestock and poultry cannot randomly pull over to the side of the road to meet federal requirements. In doing that the drivers would put loads of cattle, hogs, chickens or even bees worth tens of thousands of dollars at risk.

Congress has called a time out until Sept. 30, when the DOT will figure out what the new game plan will be. Another time out on applying the rules to all agricultural haulers lasts until June 18.

When is milk not milk? That's a question Congress also took a swing at in the Omnibus bill, when it ordered the Food and

Drug Administration to come up with a standard of identity for dairy products such as milk and cheese. The dairy industry hopes the standards will bench the use of the word "milk" to describe concoctions of ground-up nuts or soybeans mixed with sugar water and other substances.

In the late innings of the Omnibus bill Congress also managed to reduce the amount of red tape some farmers encounter when they sign up for USDA conservation programs. They no longer will have to obtain a System for Award Management registration or a Data Universal Numbering System number. Such requirements were aimed at big-dollar government contractors, not farmer or ranchers.

Like baseball manager Leo "The Lip" Durocher from years gone by, President Trump complained about the Omnibus bill even as he prepared to sign it. For U.S. agriculture, that signature made the score 5-0.

OUR VIEW



still falls short on his trade PROMISES

President Trump often talks about the impact of bad trade deals on American workers and the towns and cities where they live. This week we have the story of the impact that no trade deal could have on American farmers and the towns where they live.

Since the U.S. pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership wheat growers are worried about maintaining strong relationships with longtime foreign customers in countries such as Japan, which signed on to a revised version of the trade deal March 8 in Santiago, Chile, along with 10 other nations.

Nearly all of the wheat grown in the Pacific Northwest is sold to foreign buyers.

Worldwide, wheat production has been going like gangbusters the last few years. That's pushed prices here down even though domestic production has fallen. U.S. farmers who are having a

tough go find themselves facing the prospects of losing market share to competitors that are a party to TPP.

The president campaigned on a promise he'd dump TPP, and he did. He also promised that he'll work out bilateral deals with individual trading partners that will be better than TPP. So far, as wheat growers have noted, that hasn't happened.

"The president has promised to negotiate great new deals," the wheat industry said in a letter to U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer urging the administration to reconsider TPP. "American agriculture now counts on that promise and American wheat farmers — facing a calamity they would be hard-pressed to overcome — now depend on it."

More recently, the president has slapped high tariffs on imported steel and aluminum to protect the jobs in those domestic industries.

China has responded with new tariffs on \$3 billion worth of U.S. goods, including agricultural products. Fruit growers in the Northwest will be particularly hard hit.

Anyone who complains about the trade deficit the United States has with China and other trading partners should note that agriculture is America's export leader. American agriculture is built on trade.

There probably isn't a farmer anywhere in the United States that doesn't empathize with American workers displaced by foreign manufacturing. They would love those industries to be great again.

But to the extent that rural America and farmers voted for Trump, they didn't sign a suicide pact.

It's time for the president to make good on the second half of his promise on trade.

Too dry to burn in parts of Kansas

By JOHN SCHLAGECK
For the Capital Press

Guest
comment
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Unless something changes in the moisture situation, Barb Downey and her husband, Joe Carpenter, will not burn their grassland in the Kansas Flint Hills this season. The ranch couple report no (moisture) run-off event in more than a year on their native grassland in Riley and Wabaunsee counties.

Every spring across the vast, open Flint Hills grasslands, fires blaze for miles. The flames lick at the blue Kansas sky as the brown, dry grass crackles, crackles and bursts into orange.

Cattlemen like this east-central Kansas couple understand that controlled burning remains a range management tool that helps maintain the economic viability of the Flint Hills. Fire remains an essential element of the ecosystem.

Long before civilization came to the prairie, fires were ignited by lightning storms and the charred prairie restored the health of the native grasses. Native Americans set the first prairie fires. They used the fire to attract bison for easier hunting.

Controlled burning by those who live on the tall-grass prairie of the Flint Hills is an annual event designed to mimic nature's match. It's part of a tradition — part of the culture of the communities and the people who inhabit this region of the state.

This annual pasture burning only occurs for a few days each year. It is not a procedure that is drawn out and lasts for weeks. Weather conditions dictate the length of the burning season most years.

Not every cattleman burns his pastures every year. Instead, individual ranchers and landowners survey and decide each spring which pastures will benefit and produce a healthier, lush grass for livestock after burning. Often neighbors plan and burn together, giving them more hands to ensure a safe, controlled burn.

Because of continued dry conditions, Downey and Carpenter fear they would not be able to control the burn this season.

"It's so dry and the winds blow nearly every day," Barb says. "At the ground level, there's no humidity in the thatch in our native grasses."

Downey believes her Flint Hills region remains in an extended drought. She's not counting on moisture any time soon unless this weather pattern turns around drastically

— and right away.

For weeks the ranchers have watched forecasts serve up the possibility of rain in the seven to 10-day forecasts. By the time that period passes, there's nothing. No moisture for the bone-dry Flint Hills.

"The overriding reason we will not burn our grasslands this spring is because we're going to need every little bit of forage we can get our hands on," Barb explains.

"We don't care if it's last year's grass. At this point we need forage of any kind for our livestock."

Downey is the fourth generation in the ranching business. Her daughter represents the fifth. Decades of experience have provided this cattle family with the know-how and knowledge to plan for their cattle enterprise.

The current drought conditions began on their Riley and Wabaunsee county ranch back in 2005. Except for a couple of years of adequate moisture, drought has been a way of life for more than a decade.

"Twenty twelve marked the peak of this extended drought here in the Flint Hills," Barb says. "Right now, we're already worse this year than in 2012."

Continued dry conditions indicate burning this March or April would ensure little, if any, pasture regrowth. Downey and Carpenter are already operating in "drought-crisis mode." Irrigated land that would ordinarily soon be planted to corn will be planted to forage this spring.

"We're beyond the idea of burning," Barb says. "Conditions today remain too dry. We're not even receiving what I call 'band-aid' rains or brief showers, to help us along."

Some of the older cows will be culled earlier this year on the Downey and Carpenter ranch. They continue to look at options to lighten the feed load for their herd.

"We're planning for the worst, and hoping for better times ahead," Barb says. "Without continued moisture — and soon — we're headed for trouble."

John Schlageck is a leading commentator on agriculture and rural Kansas. Born and raised on a diversified farm in northwestern Kansas, his writing reflects a lifetime of experience, knowledge and passion. This column appears courtesy of the American Farm Bureau.

PHOTO: President Donald Trump's trade "strategy" threatens farmers and ranchers more than did the status quo.

Associated Press File