Agriculture directors ask U.S., Canada to OK USMCA

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

State and provincial agriculture directors from the U.S., Canada and Mexico affirmed their support last week for the new North American trade deal.

Meeting in Winnipeg, Canada, at the Tri-National Agricultural Accord, the directors issued a joint statement asking U.S. and Canadian lawmakers to ratify the agreement as soon as possible. Mexico already has approved the pact.

"I think collectively, in our countries, we do have the ability to help move the ball, particularly when we're on the same page," said Washington Agriculture Director Derek Sandison, who attended the annual conference.

Tri-National Agricultural Accord
Representatives of state and provincial agricultural directors from the U.S., Mexico and Canada sign a statement Nov. 14 in Winnipeg, Canada, supporting ratification of a new trade agreement between the three countries. From left, Rodolfo Huipe of the Mexican association of agriculture secretaries, Manitoba Minister of Agriculture Blaine Pedersen, Mexican Undersecretary of Agriculture Miguel Garcia Widner and North Dakota Agriculture Commissioner Doug Goehring.

The Trump administration finished negotiating the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement almost 14 months ago. The nonpartisan U.S. International Trade Commission estimates the deal will increase global U.S. farm exports by 1.1%, or $2.2 billion a year.

Much of the gain would come from higher exports of dairy and poultry products to Canada. Quotas would be lifted, but not eliminated, before tariffs that range from 200% to 300% took effect.

The USMCA also would set up new processes for resolving sanitary and phytosanitary issues, and approving biotechnology.

The USMCA would replace the North American Free Trade Agreement. Labor and environmental groups have criticized the new deal.

While the agriculture directors were meeting in Canada, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said an agreement among House Democrats that would allow for a ratification vote was "imminent."

Meanwhile, NAFTA remains in force.

"There would be much more nervousness about (ratification) if there were no underlying agreement already in place," Sandison said.

"We're anticipating an incremental increase (in exports). NAFTA did the heavy lifting," he said. "What Washington agriculture is interested in is, let's not undo a good thing."

Although the agreement remains unratified by the U.S., it's already helped relations with Mexico, Sandison said.

Idaho governor authorizes hemp transportation

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Idaho Gov. Brad Little issued an executive order Nov. 18 authorizing interstate transportation of industrial hemp within the state's borders.

The executive order is meant to resolve a conflict between state and federal law and serves as a stopgap measure until the Idaho Legislature enacts a more permanent solution.

The executive order does not authorize or legalize the production of hemp, its byproducts, oils or any other derivative prohibited by Idaho law.

The 2018 Farm Bill legalized hemp production and prevents states from prohibiting the transportation of hemp. In October, USDA issued interim rules regulating the production of hemp in states where it is legal.

Idaho law prohibits the possession of hemp unless it is comprised of only the stalks of the mature cannabis plant and contains 0.0% of tetrahydrocannabinol (THC).

Executive action is needed to temporarily resolve the conflict between state and federal law with respect to interstate transportation of hemp, the governor's office stated.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture, Idaho State Police and Idaho Transportation Department will promulgate temporary rules and work cooperatively to carry out the executive order.

"From the start, I have stated I am not opposed to a new crop such as hemp, but that we need to be sure the production and shipping of industrial hemp is not a front to smuggle illicit drugs into and around Idaho," Little said in announcing the executive order.

The legal transportation of hemp was expected, and his administration has prepared for that development by working with law enforcement and others, he said.

"My executive order is a stopgap measure to address the narrow issue of interstate transportation of hemp until the Idaho Legislature develops a permanent regulatory framework around hemp," he said.

Drivers transporting hemp across Idaho will be required to stop at the first port of entry and present documentation. Transportation will be limited to interstate highways and the immediate vicinity of an interstate highway, except in the case of a state-authorized detour.

Dan Wheat/Capital Press File
H-2A guestworkers from Mexico pick late blossoms off apple trees in Washington state. Legislation in the U.S. House would improve some aspects of the program but not others, a critic says.

Farm labor bill draws support, opposition

By DAN WHEAT
Capital Press

More than 300 agricultural groups this week sent a letter to U.S. House leaders backing a farm labor bill before its first Judiciary Committee consideration, but a Washington state farm labor association has sharpened its opposition to the legislation.

The Farm Workforce Modernization Act, H.R. 4916, introduced Oct. 30 by Reps. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., and Dan Newhouse, R-Wash., was to be heard by the House Judiciary Committee on Nov. 20. It had the backing of 24 Democrats and 20 Republicans when introduced.

"As foreign producers take advantage of our labor shortage and gain market share, America will export not only our food production but also thousands of these farm-dependent jobs. Securing a reliable and skilled workforce is essential, not only for the agriculture industry but for the U.S. economy as a whole," the agricultural groups wrote.

The bill provides renewable visas for agricultural workers in the country illegally, phases in mandatory E-Verify (electronic verification of employment eligibility), makes changes to the H-2A-visa agricultural foreign guestworker program and freezes the minimum wage of H-2A workers at 2019 levels throughout 2020.

Dan Fazio, executive director of the farm labor association Wafla, in Olympia, Wash., says the bill doesn't do enough to rein in escalating labor and housing costs.

doesn't reduce labor costs enough and that he's concerned about housing costs but thinks the bill can be amended, if not in the House, in the Senate.

The letter signed by the more than 300 groups says a few provisions in the bill "raise significant concerns" that should be worked on as the bill moves forward in Congress.

"The House must pass legislation that preserves agriculture's experienced workforce by allowing current farm workers to earn legal status. For future needs, legislation must include an agricultural worker visa program that provides access to a legal and reliable workforce moving forward," their letter states.

Fazio wrote Wafla "strongly opposes" the bill because "it will not lead to a workable future flow" of workers for labor-intensive agriculture.

Wafla is the largest provider of H-2A-visa guestworkers in the West.

Fazio called the bill "mean-spirited and anti-farmer" in a Nov. 18 email to Wafla members. For example, he said, bill sponsors refuse to add a provision allowing farmers to charge foreign workers for housing.

"How is it fair that a farmer who petitions workers for H-2A visas must provide free housing while a landscape company bringing workers in to mow lawns in King County, Wash., can charge workers who are here with an H-2B visa?" he wrote.

Domestic workers who live within 30 or 40 miles of a farm are not eligible for free housing, creating animus in the workforce, he said.