



AG AND THE CORONAVIRUS ... ONE YEAR LATER



Agriculture breathes a sigh of relief

Capital Press

The spread of COVID-19 forced the closure or curtailment of many sectors of the economy last spring and sent shockwaves through all facets of agriculture.

Restaurants and other venues were shut down, and many Americans shifted their eating habits to cook-in or take-out.

Agricultural supply chains were disrupted as processors scrambled to switch from foodservice sales to retail. Some commodity contracts were cut back only to be reinstated as the year progressed. Others were canceled.

Caught in the middle were farmers. Their markets shifted or shrank. Milk had to be dumped because there was no longer a buyer for it. The supply of cattle and other livestock was backed up as meat processors struggled to stay open amid the spreading pandemic. Nearly every segment of agriculture experienced some level of turbulence.

And prices gyrated. As price-takers, farmers were at the whim of a marketplace that was transforming and reinventing itself on the fly.

But farmers are also resourceful. Many adapted to the changing marketplace and found new customers.

And with the help of federal programs that protected their bottom line, most farmers made it through the dark-



Courtesy of Jim Simnitt

Jim Simnitt

est hours of the pandemic.

A year later, we talked with Northwest farmers and farmworkers about their experiences during those times. They were all different, but their reactions can be summed up in one sentence: "I'm still here."

Nursery

Jim Simnitt, co-owner of Simnitt Nursery in Canby, Ore.

When COVID-19 hit last March, Jim Simnitt, 42, said

his nursery was "dead smack in the middle of shipping."

Simnitt Nursery is a second-generation, 80-acre wholesale nursery specializing in rhododendrons and Pieris. The nursery ships to 35 states.

When the pandemic first jolted the market, buyers across the nation told Simnitt to halt shipments for two weeks.

"I was nervous I'd miss that flowering time, that narrow window," said Simnitt.

It was a bumpy spring. Some buyers canceled orders. Simnitt separated trucks and spaced people out, slowing production-per-hour 15%.

"I was still nervous going through April," said Simnitt.

But around May, things took a turn. People stuck at home redid their yards: gardens, lawns, new patios. Sales of Simnitt's flowering shrubs took off.

"It ended up being a really good year," Simnitt said.

But he still had to change his business model. In previous years, customers toured his nursery, handling plants. During COVID-19, he offered virtual tours using his cell phone.

"I'm really looking forward to getting back to seeing people in person," he said.

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Senate bill would mandate meatpacker cash purchases

By **CAROL RYAN DUMAS**
Capital Press

WASHINGTON, D.C. — A bill that would require any U.S. meat processing facility that slaughters over 125,000 head of cattle annually to purchase 50% of its weekly volume on the open or "spot" market has been introduced in the U.S. Senate.

The bill — offered March 24 by Sens. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, and Jon Tester, D-Mont. — aims to increase the volume of cash trade. Such transactions set the base price for formula contracts heavily used by meatpackers and provide transparency in the cattle market. Those concerns, along with packer consolidation, are



Capital Press File

Legislation introduced in the U.S. Senate would require large processors to buy most of their cattle through the cash market.

hot topics among cattle producers — with cattle groups divided on the solution.

U.S. Cattlemen's Association and R-CALF USA were quick to support the bill, while the National Cattlemen's Beef Association warned against a broad federal mandate.

NCBA will continue to work alongside its affiliates, Congress and USDA to increase price discovery and improve the business climate for producers across the country, Ethan Lane, NCBA vice president of government affairs, said in a statement.

"However, simply put, Sen. Grassley's bill misses the mark. The industry — from leading livestock economists to NCBA state affiliates — agrees that any legislative solution to

increased price discovery must account for the unique dynamics within each geographic region," he said.

A one-size-fits-all government mandate rarely achieves the intended goal, he said.

NCBA supports a voluntary approach first to increase the number of negotiated trades. If a voluntary approach is unsuccessful, its grassroots policy provides guidance toward a legislative solution that more closely resembles Sen. Deb Fischer's Cattle Market Transparency Act, he said. Fischer is a Nebraska Republican.

Fischer's bill would establish regional minimums for negotiated cash trade to enable price discovery and provide cattle producers with more market information.

Farmworkers are getting vaccinated across the West

By **SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN**
and **GEORGE PLAVEN**
Capital Press

Across the West, COVID-19 vaccination is underway for farmworkers.

Health departments are vaccinating farmworkers through mobile clinics and organized events.

In a recent United Farm Workers Foundation survey of 10,149 farmworkers, 73% said they would get the vaccine as soon as possible, 22% said they were neutral and 5% said they would not get vaccinated.

To encourage vaccination, some employers, including California-based Bolthouse Farms, are offering workers cash bonuses.

Oregon

As of March 29, all migrant and seasonal farmworkers were eligible to be scheduled for a COVID-19 vaccine.

Rudy Owens, a spokesman for the Oregon Health Authority, said vaccination planning for vulnerable populations — including farmworkers — has been underway for months. The agency launched a pilot project with the Governor's Office in early March, working with federally qualified health centers to administer vaccines.

"The goal was to expand vaccination efforts to help serve those experiencing the worst impacts of COVID-19," Owens said.

One such event was held March 24-27 with Morrow County Public



Ryan Brennecke/Oregon Capital Insider
Across the Western U.S., farmworkers are getting vaccinated at mobile clinics, vaccination events and other venues.

Health at the Sage Center in Boardman, Ore. Multilingual staff and volunteers were able to vaccinate 1,066 people during the four-day event, held in the center parking lot.

Owens said OHA is also partnering with other community-based organizations, farmworker unions such as Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste, and advertising on Spanish-language radio stations to reach farmworkers in rural parts of the state.

"This community is often mobile and based in rural communities, making access to services difficult," Owens said. "Many farmworkers speak Spanish or meso-American Indigenous languages, so we have worked to ensure information is culturally and linguistically appropriate."

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