

Farm group sounds alarm on climate bill

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Legislation to help lower the barriers that prevent farmers, ranchers and forest landowners from participating in carbon credit markets has gained broad support in agricultural circles. But it is not without opposition.

The Growing Climate Solutions Act would create a certification program at USDA for third-party verifiers and technical service providers that help producers and forest landowners earn carbon credits.

The legislation has cleared the Senate Agriculture Committee and was introduced in the House on April 22.

Numerous groups, including American Farm

Bureau Federation and National Farmers Union, are backing the bill.

But one farm organization is strongly opposed to the legislation, saying it would only benefit agribusiness corporations and do little for the environment.

"We know there is a very large number of agricultural organizations that are in support," Joe Maxwell, president and CEO of Family Farm Action and a Missouri farmer, told Capital Press.

Family Farm Action describes itself on its website as "a coalition of farm-



Joe Maxwell

MORE INFORMATION

Family Farm Action:
<https://farmaction.us/>

ers, workers, local businesses and organizations building the 'political muscle' to take on abusive corporate monopoly power."

It was not an easy decision to oppose the bill, but it is not the right direction for family farmers, Maxwell said.

"Those that will benefit are those that are already in the business of verifying carbon capture and the polluters," he said.

Agribusinesses that stand to benefit the most from carbon credits also have a hand

in the companies buying and selling credits to third parties. They are determining what carbon sequestration is and telling farmers how to farm, he said.

"They will hold all the cards," he said.

USDA needs to be regulating climate-solution practices and needs to be the owner of the carbon credit bank. But this bill would have USDA sanctioning those companies, and those companies will have a monopoly, he said.

If USDA is granting monopolies, there needs to be antitrust standards like there are in the telephone and utilities sectors, he said, but this bill is silent on those standards.

This will lead to agribusiness companies telling farm-

ers "you farm this way and we will give you a credit for those practices" with no guarantee that credit will have any value for the farmers, he said.

"Farmers could end up with contracts for how they will farm, but it doesn't guarantee any value or what farmers would be paid," he said.

"Farmers don't need another monopoly like poultry—and it being sanctioned by USDA," he said.

Family Farm Action strongly agrees farmers can be part of the climate change solution, but the carbon credits under the proposed bill will be owned and sold by third parties, he said.

Another problem is that a plant or concentrated animal feeding operation, some

owned by the third-party agribusiness that are associated with the verifiers, can purchase credits and continue to pollute, he said.

"This doesn't do anything to stop the polluters," he said.

If they're not eliminating carbon emissions, they shouldn't be eligible for carbon credits, he said.

"This is being supported by a lot of folks because everybody thinks they're going to make a lot of money," he said.

But the benefit will go to the agribusiness corporations, and there's no evidence it will actually reduce emissions, he said.

Farmers have been here before when "big ag" comes in with a scheme for new profits and says "just trust us," he said.

USDA cancels Farmers to Families Food Box Program

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

USDA will permanently end its Farmers to Families Food Box Program at the end of May.

The program, which bought meat, dairy and produce from farmers and directed it to hungry families, was created by the Trump administration during the pandemic.

Over the past year, USDA has spent more than \$4 billion on the program and delivered more than 156 million boxes through mid-April.

Supporters say the program helped farmers and hungry families. Critics say it was wasteful, inefficient and had pricing problems. Ultimately, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack pulled the program.

Some farm groups, including the American Farm Bureau Federation, expressed disappointment that the program would be discontinued. In a statement, AFBF President Zippy Duvall said "the need is still there."

But USDA staff say the program was never meant to be permanent.

"The food box program was designed and implemented as a temporary effort to respond to market disruption caused by a global pandemic," Matt Herrick, USDA spokesman, told the Capital Press on April 21.

Herrick said the program had "significant challenges." Distribution was not based on need; rural counties were underserved; costs fluctuated; food varied in quality and quantity; perishable items often went unrefrigerated; and small businesses couldn't compete.

Herrick said the agency is "not going to replace the program."

However, USDA plans to combat hunger through other means, including a new dairy donation program, a fresh produce box program, school meal programs and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

These programs will rely on existing infrastructure.

"We're going to continue to provide healthy food, but we're going to do it through the most efficient system that we have," Vilsack told the House Agriculture Appropriations Committee April 21.

April 9, USDA announced it will use pandemic relief funds from the Emergency Food Assistance Program, or TEFAP, to run a new produce-only food box program at least through Sept. 30.

Under the new program, boxes must contain 10 to 12 pounds of food including 3 to 5 pounds of vegetables, 3 to 5 pounds of fruit and at least two locally grown items, if possible.

USDA will begin soliciting produce in the near future. Produce suppliers interested in participating can email TEFAPFreshProduce@usda.gov.

On the dairy side, on April 20 USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service formally informed dairy producers and processors about plans for the dairy donation program.

Under the new program, whenever a processor donates dairy products to a nonprofit, it will be reimbursed.

USDA's announcement didn't seem to take the dairy industry by surprise.

In a statement April 21, Jim Mulhern, president and CEO of the National Milk Producers Federation, said the Farmers to Families Food Box Program was both "very helpful" and "had its challenges."

"That's why we are not surprised by the decision to move beyond the food box program, and in fact, expected it," he said.

Mulhern said his organization supports USDA's new plan.

Susannah Morgan, Oregon Food Bank CEO, said that while she's grateful for Farmers to Families partnerships, she agrees with USDA that investments in programs such as SNAP "are a more effective avenue to connect hard-hit communities with nutritious food."

California almond acreage on the rise

By SIERRA DAWN MCCLAIN
Capital Press

MODESTO, Calif. — California's almond acreage continues to rapidly increase.

New data from USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service, combined with acreage estimates from LandIQ, an agricultural consulting service, show that the number of mature, crop-bearing almond acres statewide increased 5.9% between 2019 and 2020.

California now has 1.25 million acres of mature almond trees and 1.6 million total almond acres, including young trees.

Nonpareil almonds — the state's most popular almond variety — remained in the lead, followed by Monterey, Butte, Carmel and Padre varieties.

Fresno, Kern, Stanislaus, Merced and Madera were the leading counties, together accounting for 73% of the total bearing acreage.

Industry leaders say the growth in acreage has largely been fueled by growth in demand, and global consumer demand for almonds continues



Courtesy of Jim Watts

According to new USDA data, California almond acreage continues to expand.

to gain momentum.

"Demand has consistently been very strong during this crop year," Richard Waycott, president and CEO of the Almond Board, said in a statement.

Between August 2020 and March 2021, Waycott said global shipments went up 17.7% and production crossed the 3 billion-pound threshold for the first time.

Waycott said he anticipates that almond production "will

also rise in coming years."

Much of the demand comes from abroad.

According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, California produces about 80% of the world's almonds, and the nuts are California's No. 1 agricultural export.

The latest data from USDA show that all major export regions for the crop have reported strong numbers for the year to date. Shipments to China

and Hong Kong were up 59%, South Korea up 45%, India up 51% and Western Europe up 12% compared to a year ago.

This acreage report from USDA-NASS is the first of three major reports expected for the almond crop this year. May 12, the agency will release an initial forecast of this year's crop. July 12, NASS will release a more accurate 2021 crop report based on actual nut counts on trees.

Mild winter, early spring aid SW Idaho vineyards

By BRAD CARLSON
Capital Press

Winter and early spring weather treated Gregg Alger's vineyards well, but he's not celebrating just yet.

"Vines were able to come down slowly (to dormancy) in gradually colder temperatures," the Caldwell, Idaho-based Alger said. Winter overnight lows often were higher than usual.

Now, following a warm winter and early spring, "going into 2021 bud break, the vineyards look good," he said. "But we're still in a pretty tricky stage now."

Most southwest Idaho vineyards began emerging from winter dormancy on schedule, but the risk of frost will continue until mid-May.

"Late frosts are a big concern right now," said Alger, who owns Huston Vineyards. Recently, nights have been "a little cool."

Meanwhile, "we are watering the vineyards earlier than I have ever watered them," he said. "Things are a little drier than



Bitner Vineyards

Syrah grapes starting to bud April 20 at Bitner Vineyards in Caldwell, Idaho.

usual."

Martin Fujishin, a winemaker in the Caldwell-Marsing area, said it appears vineyards are a bit ahead of schedule compared to long-term averages. "We are seeing some bud breaks in some of our higher-elevation blocks

and on our warmer sites."

Getting an early start "always gives us concerns about seeing frost," Fujishin said. In the Sunnyslope growing area, where frost can occur until around May 10, "we're always waiting for that last frost date to pass

before we can take a breath of relief."

Dry springs in the Treasure Valley usually prompt concern about adequate water supply for irrigation, he said, adding that it looks mostly good for now.

In recent years, Fujishin has seen wider variation in spring weather.

"We had some pretty warm days in February," he said. "Some vines got a jump-start earlier than we would like to see. In an ideal world, we would see a gradual increase in temperatures that gives those vines a chance to wake up in a measured way."

Vineyard and winery owner Ron Bitner of Caldwell said his vines stayed healthy and undamaged over winter.

"So far are off to a good start" in the 2021 growing season, he said.

"It looks like we are pretty much on schedule," Bitner said. Pruning is finished.

The state has 69 wineries and about 1,300 acres of vineyards.

Combine demolition derby canceled for second year

By MATTHEW WEAVER
Capital Press

LIND, Wash. — Organizers of a popular Eastern Washington combine demolition derby have canceled the event for a second straight year due to COVID-19 restrictions.

"It's really the only decision," said Josh Knodel, a Lind, Wash., farmer and chairman of the Lind Lions Club, which sponsors the event each year as a fundraiser.

The board recently met with the Adams County Health Department director, who outlined the requirements necessary for a safe event. They included limiting the number of spectators to 25% of capacity and hiring extra security.

"It would be too hard for us as a club to enforce those restrictions," Knodel told the Capital Press.

Operating with a smaller audience without raising ticket prices wouldn't work, he said.



Matthew Weaver/Capital Press File

The Lind, Wash., Lions Club has canceled its annual combine demolition derby for a second straight year due to pandemic restrictions.

"The only reason the Lions Club puts the combine derby on is for a fundraiser," Knodel said. "If we can't make any money at it, it kind of defeats the purpose."

The event typically draws 5,000 to 6,000 people each year.

"It wouldn't be the same event people are used to," he said. "It's not worth the headache and leaving a bad taste in people's mouths. That's not what we want to do as a club."

Knodel said it costs \$20,000

LIND, WASH., LIONS CLUB

Donations can be sent to:

Lind Lions Club

P.O. Box 37

Lind, WA 99341

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/lindcombinedemolitionderby>

to put on the event. The club typically makes a profit of \$25,000, which goes back into the Lind community.

This year, Knodel expects the club to dig into reserves to continue supporting the community.

"We've always been prepared for a rainy day," Knodel said. "I guess all these people all these years who have criticized us for not spending all of our money every year, well, now it's going to pay off."