

News from Washington: June 22-26

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May Was Deadliest Month for Meatpacking Workers

Over the past 100 days, 238 employees with the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union, which represents meatpacking, grocery store and health care workers, have died from Covid-19 and nearly 29,000 have been infected or exposed, [the union reported on Thursday](#).

At least 65 meatpacking workers have died from the virus. April saw the biggest spike in new cases at meat processing plants, the union said, and May was the deadliest month for the industry with 38 workers deaths.

In food processing facilities, there have been at least 28 worker deaths, the group said. April was the deadliest month for the industry with 19 deaths — that month also saw the biggest spike in cases.

The union reupped its call for hazard pay for essential workers, as well as a \$15 per hour wage. Leaders also want to see a public mask mandate in all 50 states, as well as a national public registry to track infections in workers.

After Long Decline, SNAP on the Rise Due to COVID-19

The number of people participating in SNAP went up in March and the cost of the program jumped by nearly 15 percent, to \$5.1 billion, new data shows.

The data, [recently posted online by USDA](#), provides the first national look at how the food safety net began to expand in the early days of the pandemic. Unlike other federal benefits such as unemployment insurance, SNAP data is not released in a timely fashion and is posted months after the fact.

The total number of people enrolled in the program in March was 37.3 million, a relatively small but significant increase from February when participation was 36.9 million. The average monthly benefit per person, however, jumped up substantially, from \$121 per person to \$137 per person as aid from Congress kicked in.

The numbers from USDA are behind in showing the real national picture. SNAP enrollment has gone up substantially in several states that have reported on a more regular basis. In Florida, for example, enrollment jumped more than 36 percent between February and May. In Texas, it went up nearly 19 percent, according to preliminary data aggregated by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

Feeding America, which represents a large network of major food banks, is hosting a virtual fly-in this week with 99 food banks from 42 states and D.C. to press for a 15 percent increase in benefits until employment levels rebound. The latest PR push uses the hashtag #ShortenTheLines on Twitter, a reference to the unprecedented number of people waiting in line at food distribution events.

The group is out with [a new video today](#) urging people to ask Congress to not just support food banks but also SNAP.

Anti-hunger groups are also pushing Congress to extend the Pandemic EBT program, which gives families with schoolchildren a one-time benefit payment to make up for lost free or subsidized meals at schools. They want the program extended through summer to replace summer meals programs with the possibility of extending into the next school year, if needed.

“There is an urgency to not letting this program lapse and having kids go hungry in the meantime,” said Lisa Davis, senior vice president of the No Kid Hungry Campaign, during a webinar on Tuesday.

Help Wanted for Farmworkers

Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.), ranking member on the Senate Appropriations subcommittee that oversees USDA funding, plans to introduce a bill this week that would offer more financial support for all ag workers and their employers.

Democrats in each chamber have talked up the need for better protections for essential employees, and they’ve blasted the Trump administration’s efforts so far to safeguard vulnerable workers in the food and farm industries.

“There are few things more impactful than paid sick leave,” said Giev Kashkooli, political and legislative director for the United Farm Workers of America. “Because if workers were to make the decision between staying home and protecting themselves, or working to feed their families, they will choose to feed their families.”

Farm Aid Tops \$4B

USDA has paid just over \$4 billion in direct payments to farmers and ranchers stung by the coronavirus pandemic and supply chain disruptions, since launching the \$16 billion stimulus program at the end of May. More than 10 percent of the money has gone to Iowa farmers, the most of any state.

Half of the funds went to livestock producers, while growers of corn, soybeans and other non-specialty crops received just over \$1 billion. Dairy farmers got about \$900 million, while growers of fruits, nuts and vegetables received about \$84 million, according to USDA’s weekly update.

Of course, out of the 250,000 producers that have received payments, the vast majority are livestock producers and/or row crop growers, while only 2,253 were specialty crop growers.

Senators Grill Meatpackers Over Exports to China

Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) and Cory Booker (D-N.J.) [sent a letter to Tyson Foods, JBS, Cargill and Smithfield Foods this week](#) with a list of questions about their actions during the pandemic — especially how they could export “massive amounts of pork and other meats to consumers in China” while warning that the U.S. meat supply chain was breaking.

The senators suggested that the high volume of meat exports in April, when many slaughterhouses were shutting down because of coronavirus outbreaks among their workers, flies in the face of concerns about a potential meat shortage — as well as the sharp rise in retail meat prices at U.S. grocery stores.

It’s the latest case of blowback against large companies that dominate the highly concentrated meat industry. The sector has faced growing scrutiny because of the outbreaks at processing plants and a string of antitrust actions against major meatpackers.

Climate Ag Bill Picks Up Steam

The Senate Agriculture Committee didn't let the ongoing pandemic stop it from holding a hearing Wednesday on a new bipartisan bill to bolster carbon markets, a concept increasingly backed by farm groups.

The committee discussed the bill, introduced by ranking member Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and Sen. Mike Braun (R-Ind.), while maintaining social distance through a new spaced out arrangement, with some lawmakers wearing masks and some beaming in via remote video. Two of the witnesses testified remotely. It was the committee's first hearing since March.

The discussion was overwhelmingly positive, though several lawmakers reiterated that any carbon credit certification system should be centered around benefiting farmers, not large companies or others seeking to buy carbon offsets — and that such a program not inadvertently incentivize corporations to buy up farmland.

“What we don't want ... is the third party verifiers who are going to receive USDA certified labels, or the corporations that want to greenwash their businesses” to be the primary beneficiaries, said Sen. John Boozman (R-Ark.), as he questioned the panel. “How do we make sure that the benefit, the value actually goes to the farmers and not the middlemen or corporations?”

“I'm thrilled we've finally got a bipartisan effort,” said Fred Yoder, an Ohio farmer and co-chair of Solutions from the Land, a farmer-led group that works to get producers involved in tackling climate change and sustainable development goals. Yoder told MA this week that the recent movement in Congress is “remarkable.”

A companion bill is set to be introduced on Friday by House Ag members [Abigail Spanberger](#) (D-Va.) and Don Bacon (R-Neb.).

The House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis is expected to release a report by next week with recommendations on legislation and next steps for Congress, including on agriculture.

Bayer Settles for \$10.5B

After a flood of lawsuits against the German chemicals giant over its glyphosate weedkiller and more than a year of negotiations, Bayer agreed to the massive settlement with thousands of plaintiffs who claimed exposure to Roundup was responsible for their non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Up to \$9.5 billion will be paid to settle the majority of pending litigation, while \$1.25 billion will be set aside to resolve future claims and to research whether Roundup causes cancer.

The World Health Organization concluded in 2015 that glyphosate is a probable carcinogen, while the EPA has long maintained that it's safe. Liam Condon, head of Bayer's crop science division, said the company doesn't intend to stop selling Roundup, and the settlement doesn't contain any admission of liability or wrongdoing.

WOTUS Launch Gets the Greenlight

An eleventh-hour blue-state bid to halt the Trump administration's rewritten Waters of the U.S. rule was rejected on Friday by a federal judge in San Francisco, who said the coalition of Democratic attorneys general didn't have enough chance of winning their broader legal challenge against the rule to warrant a preliminary injunction.

The decision means that the final rule can take effect on June 22. The joint EPA and Army Corps policy shrinks the scope of federal protections for streams and wetlands under the Clean Water Act — a long-time priority for farmers, ranchers, home-builders and other industries.

Just a few hours later the Friday decision, a federal court in Colorado granted the state's request to freeze implementation of the rule there, concluding that the state was likely to succeed in challenging the administration's definition of protected waterways. Letting the rule take effect, only to be later struck down, "would likely create unnecessary confusion among the regulated community about what standard really applies," the judge wrote.

Another Court Win For EPA

A separate federal court on Friday [rejected an emergency petition](#) that would have blocked the use of three dicamba products, after the agency earlier this month [vacated the products' registrations](#) but allowed farmers to continue using existing stocks of the herbicides.

Commodity groups like the American Soybean Association said the decision was needed to avoid disrupting farmers who made business decisions like purchasing weedkillers months ago and are now in the middle of planting and growing their crops. "Soy farmers are dependent on those rules not changing in the middle of the game and are glad the court got it right in these orders," [ASA said in a statement](#).

Second Round of U.S.-U.K. Talks Wrap Up Friday

U.S. and U.K. negotiators could announce today that they've reached agreement on some of the 30 or more chapters expected to be in a bilateral free trade deal. If not, that would be a bad sign for U.K. hopes of completing and signing the agreement before the U.S. presidential election.

U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer told members of Congress last week that the two sides have begun exchanging text for the proposed deal and that he hoped "at least a couple of chapters" could be closed out this week. (Worth noting: Lighthizer has since [threatened more tariffs](#) on British exports in a long-running dispute over European subsidies for Airbus.)

To get a deal before November, the two sides have to resolve contentious agricultural issues, including the U.K.'s food safety and animal welfare regulations that keep out imports of U.S. beef, poultry and pork because of the veterinary drugs used by American farmers and ranchers or how the animals are processed at slaughter facilities.

The U.S. exported more than \$13 billion worth of beef and pork products to countries around the world in 2019, but only \$3.9 million to the U.K., according to USDA data. The figures are similarly dismal for poultry. The U.S. exported nearly \$4.3 billion of poultry meat to the rest of the world last year, but only \$420,000 to the U.K.

Joint Statement from USDA and FDA on Food Export Restrictions Pertaining to COVID-19

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue and FDA Commissioner Stephen M. Hahn, M.D., issued the following statement regarding food export restrictions pertaining to COVID-19:

"The United States understands the concerns of consumers here domestically and around the world who want to know that producers, processors and regulators are taking every necessary precaution to prioritize food safety especially during these challenging times. However, efforts by some countries to restrict global food exports related to COVID-19 transmission are not consistent with the known science of transmission."

“There is no evidence that people can contract COVID-19 from food or from food packaging. The U.S. food safety system, overseen by our agencies, is the global leader in ensuring the safety of our food products, including product for export.”

[Source: USDA](#)

Corn Staters To Wheeler: No SREs!

A bipartisan group of 18 corn-state senators is calling on Wheeler to reject 52 requests from refiners for exemptions from the Renewable Fuel Standard.

The senators, in a letter led by Joni Ernst (R-Iowa) and Amy Klobuchar (D-Minn.), lean on EPA to deny refiners’ request for waivers from RFS requirements for this year and ask Wheeler to apply nationally a 10th Circuit Court of Appeals decision rejecting refinery exemptions. But their focus is on the requests from refiners for exemptions dating back as far as 2011.

"The approval of [small refinery exemptions] for past compliance years at this moment would only worsen the unprecedented economic challenges facing the biofuels industry and the rural communities that it supports," they write. "EPA must deny these petitions and apply the 10th Circuit decision nationally."

Senate Ag Presses USDA on WIC Waivers

The Agriculture Department has made it easier for states to continue serving WIC participants during the pandemic, including allowing families to sign up and get their benefits remotely, but Senate Agriculture Chair Pat Roberts (R-Kan.) and ranking member Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) are now urging Secretary Sonny Perdue to extend these regulatory flexibilities through Sept. 30.

USDA is currently granting month-to-month extensions, but lawmakers argue this setup makes it harder for states to “plan effectively” and essentially amounts to an administrative burden.

“Extending these existing state-based waivers through September 30, 2020, would provide certainty and availability to WIC participants, providers and vendors navigating variable phased re-opening procedures across public, private, and health sectors,” reads the letter, which was signed by nearly the entire committee.

The National WIC Association has also urged USDA to extend the flexibility as food insecurity rates have surged, especially for families with children. As states move toward reopening, families may still be hesitant to show up in-person to meet WIC requirements, as they did pre-pandemic. Some clinics are co-located with county health departments, for example, which means they may be adjacent to Covid-19 testing — something that could further deter families.

Douglas Greenaway, president and CEO of the organization, last week expressed frustration about USDA not granting longer-term flexibility as states try to reopen in a staggered way. “It really feels like [USDA] is responding to the president’s reelection needs and the needs of the economy and the stock market more than the health and wellbeing of families and WIC providers,” Greenaway said.

USDA Provides Flexibilities to Ensure Kids Receive Meals This Fall

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue today announced a range of nationwide flexibilities to ensure America’s children receive the nutritious food they need throughout the upcoming school year. These waivers give states, schools, and childcare providers time to plan for how

they will serve children in the fall, including allowing for new and innovative feeding options as the nation recovers from the coronavirus.

“As the country re-opens and schools prepare for the fall, a one-size-fits-all approach to meal service simply won’t cut it,” said Secretary Sonny Perdue. “The flexibilities announced today give states, schools, and child care providers the certainty they need to operate the USDA child nutrition programs in ways that make sense given their local, on-the-ground situations and ensure America’s children can count on meal service throughout the school year.”

As fall nears, schools are considering many different learning models. This announcement empowers them to operate the School Breakfast Program (SBP) and National School Lunch Program (NSLP) to best serve their students throughout the 2020-2021 school year. It also allows providers in the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) to tailor operations to serve the children in their care. USDA is providing flexibilities around meal patterns, group-setting requirements, meal service times, and parent/guardian pick-up of meals for kids across all three programs to address anticipated changes for the coming school year.

USDA is also announcing a new flexibility that waives the requirement for high schools to provide students the option to select some of the foods offered in a meal. While this practice, known as “offer versus serve” is encouraged, social distancing or meals-in-the-classroom models would make this regulatory requirement difficult. Collectively, these waivers reduce barriers to meal service options that support a transition back to normal operations while simultaneously responding to evolving local conditions.

[Source: USDA](#)

Feds Outline How to Protect Seafood Workers From Pandemic

The CDC on Thursday released new guidance to protect seafood workers from Covid-19 as cases spike among employees in the sector. It instructs employers to develop a plan for assessing and controlling the spread of the virus as workers have close contact with one another, increasing their risk. The recommendations also note that communal housing and living quarters onboard vessels for seasonal workers may also increase their chances of infection.

[The guidance from the CDC](#), developed in consultation with the FDA, repeats most of the same recommendations for other essential industries, such as instructing employers to screen workers by taking temperatures and checking for symptoms, installing physical barriers and implementing sanitary measures, and using personal protective gear.

But the guidance does consider the seafood industry’s unique challenges, such as what to do when an employee offshore tests positive (isolation from the rest of the crew) and suggests that employers consider quarantining workers for two weeks before heading out to sea.

The federal government’s input comes as Alaska fishing towns are seeing a jump in cases. Twelve OBI Seafood workers in Dillingham, a hub of the Bristol Bay fishing district, tested positive this week while in quarantine, [reports Alaska Public Media](#). Alaskans have been nervous about cases increasing in conjunction with workers arriving for the summer salmon season.

Maine lawmakers were happy to see President Donald Trump’s order to the Agriculture Department to extend bailout funds initially meant for farmers burned by retaliatory tariffs from the trade war with China to lobster fishermen who have seen demand for their exports dry up in

recent months. Maine Sens. Angus King (I) and Susan Collins (R), along with Rep. Chellie Pingree (D), called the decision “encouraging” [in a joint statement](#), saying they’ve been pushing for aid to the ailing industry for months.