



NATIONAL GRANGE OF THE ORDER OF PATRONS OF HUSBANDRY

American Values. Hometown Roots.

View from the Hill



POLICY UPDATES and ISSUE NEWS JANUARY 2024 WRAP-UP

WASHINGTON OVERVIEW

The nation's capital has been dealing with lingering snow and cold temperatures like the rest of the country, but the arctic blast hasn't cooled the political atmosphere. Congress prevented a government shutdown by kicking the can to March 1 and March 8. There's still no agreement on funding support for Ukraine, Israel and Taiwan or a solution to the border crisis. In fact, it appears that a promising bipartisan agreement on a compromise border control package in the Senate has now been tanked. Other important legislation is languishing in committees on both sides of the Hill. As well, it appears as though President Biden and former President Trump have clear sailing to their party's nomination for the presidency. Americans appear to be feeling more upbeat about the economy as the stock market pushes to new records and inflation begins to taper off.

AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

GAO critical of USDA foreign land ownership monitoring.

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) released long-awaited report in late January that said USDA staff fail to sufficiently verify the accuracy of foreign land ownership data and are slow to share information on those landholdings with the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States as required by law. The report detailed a list of challenges crippling USDA efforts to track foreign landholdings. These include a handbook that provides only limited instructions on collecting information, data entry errors in agency spreadsheets, funding constraints limiting the creation of a searchable database of foreign landholdings, and missing information on some of the submitted forms. Secretary Vilsack says he's working on these challenges and Congress plans to become more deeply involved in the next steps to assure accuracy and completeness in the program.

Farm bill timing remains elusive.

The latest stopgap funding measure (a third continuing resolution) now expiring in March may delay farm bill consideration even further. House Ag Committee Chairman G. T. Thompson had planned to move the House version of the farm bill in March when the House is in session for three consecutive weeks. Thompson remains guardedly optimistic of that time frame, but the government funding bills are also favorites to attach other bills and eat up floor time, derailing other legislation. Strong support remains among producers for the 2018 farm bill which has been extended through this year.

HEALTH CARE

Grange updates Biden administration on rural obesity.

The National Grange alerted the administration's top health care leadership at the Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Medicare and Medicaid Services, and the White House Policy Council about the prevalence of obesity in rural America. In letters to HHS Secretary Becerra, CMS Administrator Brooks-LaSure and the Policy Council, the Grange referenced a recent report by the University of Chicago on obesity among rural populations. The report found that obesity in rural areas is over six times greater than in urban cities. Obesity has been identified as a significant risk factor for cardiovascular disease, cancer, and type 2 diabetes which are leading causes of mortality and morbidity in the U.S. Nearly a quarter of all residents in rural counties are on Medicare or Medicaid. Yet CMS guidance does not permit coverage for drugs that treat obesity under Medicare Part D. The Grange urged the administration to extend Medicare coverage so rural seniors living with obesity can have access to obesity treatment options just as those with other chronic diseases.

Grange files petition for early cancer detection approval.

The National Grange filed official comments with the Molecular and Clinical Genetics Panel of the Medical Devices Advisory Committee at the Food and Drug Administration to request final review and approval of multi-cancer early detection (MCED) tests. MCED tests will help more people find cancer in earlier, treatable stages and will advance health equity by giving rural Americans an easy-to-administer blood test that can detect multiple variations of cancer earlier. With limited access to health care in rural areas, MCED tests would reduce late -stage cancer diagnosis when treatment is more difficult and has a lower chance of success.

Over half of mental health visits via telemedicine.

An analysis of clinical outpatient data by researchers at the Veterans Affairs Health Care System published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* found that telemedicine rates remain high following the COVID-19 pandemic, with more than half of mental health care visits being conducted remotely via video conferencing.

TAXES

Hill announces deal on tax breaks.

Senate Finance Committee Chair Ron Wyden (D-OR) and House Ways and Means Committee Chair Jason Smith (R-MO) have agreed on a bipartisan deal that would increase limits on the Section 179 expensing provision and restore the bonus depreciation to 100%, both popular with farmers and ranchers. The Section 179 proposal would raise the expensing limit to \$1.29 million and increase the phaseout threshold to \$3.22 million with both indexed to inflation. The bonus depreciation provision allows businesses to immediately write off the cost of equipment and buildings. The deal also includes an expansion of the child tax credit and restores business deductions for research and development costs, interest payments and capital investments. To pay for the deal, tax writers would drop the employment retention tax credit which they say has been aggressively marketed within the tax industry and has been a source of fraudulent business activity. The tax package has cleared the House Ways and Means Committee on a 40-3 bipartisan vote and is headed to the House floor.

TELECOMMUNICATIONS

Patent trolls threaten to keep rural America offline.

Patent trolls are shell companies, often backed by hedge funds, who accumulate patents for the sole purpose of pursuing infringement litigation. They seek money from productive companies in the U.S. who participate in the global supply chain to bring American users innovative products. The International Trade Commission (ITC) is

charged to protect Americans from unfair import practices. But if the ITC finds patent infringement, it cannot use discretion, the way a court can, to frame the right remedy. Instead, it can only impose domestic import bans that bar products with infringed technology from entering the U.S. If a patent troll alleges a single patent is infringed upon among the dozens of components in a cell phone for example, then the ITC can bar that entire category of mobile phones. To end the digital divide in America, we need both the rural internet infrastructure (currently being rolled out under the Broadband Equity, Access and Deployment Program) and the right cutting edge mobile devices to connect to that infrastructure. But patent trolls are threatening the supply of mobile devices. Congress has introduced the bipartisan Advancing Americans Interest Act which the Grange supports. The Act would restrict the ability of patent trolls to file frivolous investigations. The National Grange has been calling attention to patent troll abuses to the system for several years.

OF INTEREST

Supreme Court may limit federal agency power.

A controversial 40-year-old legal doctrine is now before the Supreme Court for review. The *Chevron* doctrine is a longstanding rule that requires courts to defer to the executive branch on how to interpret ambiguous worded statutes where Congress has not been clear enough. Therefore, when a statute is ambiguous, the court may defer the issue to a federal agency for interpretation. The practice has strengthened presidential administrations' ability to regulate wide aspects of daily life. *Chevron* critics contend that judges are required to abdicate their responsibility to interpret the law. *Chevron* supporters question whether overturning *Chevron* would unleash a flood of litigation as people who lost cases because of the doctrine would seek to have their issues reheard.

PERSPECTIVE

- “ The problem with winter sports is that-follow me closely here-they generally take place in winter. ~ **Dave Barry** ”
- “ To appreciate the beauty of a snow flake it is necessary to stand out in the cold. ~ **Aristotle** ”
- “ What good is the warmth of summer without the cold of winter to give it sweetness. ~ **John Steinbeck** ”
- “ Wisdom comes with winters. ~ **Oscar Wilde** ”
- “ O, wind, if winter comes, can spring be far behind? ~ **Percy Bysshe Shelley** ”
- “ No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn. ~ **Hal Borland** ”
- “ In winter, I plot and plan. In spring, I move. ~ **Henry Rollins** ”