

WASHINGTON REPORT  
January 2015  
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**New Chairs for House and Senate Committees**

With the November elections in the rear view mirror, members of Congress have been jockeying for committee leadership assignments on Capitol Hill. Due to a self-imposed GOP rule that limits its committee chairs to three terms, nearly half of the current chairs in the House will have to step aside, including Ag Committee Chair Frank Lucas of Oklahoma. **Michael Conaway of Texas** will take over as House Ag Committee chairman. He grew up in Odessa, TX and was a member of Odessa Permian High School football team that won a state championship in 1966 (which eventually led to the movie “Friday Night Lights”). He has a B.A. in accounting from Texas A & M. He worked at Price Waterhouse after serving in the army, and then was the chief financial officer for Bush Exploration. Rep. **Collin Peterson of Minnesota** will remain as the Ranking Member of the House Ag Committee.

The new chair of the House Natural Resources Committee will be **Rob Bishop from Utah** who will take over for the retiring Doc Hastings from Washington. Bishop grew up in Kaysville, UT, just north of Salt Lake City and has been a lifelong resident of the district that he will be representing for the 7<sup>th</sup> term in Congress. Bishop will seek to extend the expiring Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILT) and Secure Rural Schools (SRS), two programs that provide critical funding to rural counties across the West, which includes funding for invasive weed management. Support for those programs is broad and bipartisan, but finding funding and agreeing how the money is spent will be a challenge. **Rep. Raul Grijalva (AZ)**, a strong proponent for invasive species management, will be the new ranking member of the House Natural Resources Committee.

For the House Appropriations Committee, **Rep. Harold Rogers (KY)** will remain the chair and **Rep. Nita Lowey (NY)** will remain the ranking member of the full committee. The “cardinals” or subcommittee chairs for Agriculture and Rural Development, Energy and Water Development, and Interior and Environment will remain the same. They are **Robert Aderholt (AL)**, **Mike Simpson (ID)**, and **Ken Calvert (CA)**, respectively.

In the Senate, **Thad Cochran of Mississippi**, the current Ranking Member of the Senate Ag Committee, will be named as the new Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, a position he occupied from 2005-2007. **Sen. Pat Roberts of Kansas** will be named as the new Chair of the Senate Ag Committee. As House Ag Committee Chair in the 1990’s, Roberts was a driving force behind the “freedom to farm” commodity policy in the 1996 Farm Bill. He is a fourth generation Kansan from Topeka, KS, has a journalism degree from Kansas State, and served four years in the Marine Corps. He was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1980 and then to the Senate in 1996 where he has served since. Senator Roberts has been a proponent of research and technology and had led efforts in promoting food safety and biosecurity. **Sen. Deb Stabenow of Michigan**, the current Sen. Ag Committee Chair will now

slide down to the Ranking Member slot. Another **Kansas Senator, Jim Moran**, will chair the Senate Ag Appropriations committee. It was anticipated that Sen. Roy Blunt from Missouri would move up to that spot after having served as the ranking member, but he chose to take the helm of the Labor, HHS, and Education appropriations subcommittee instead. The new ranking member of the Senate Ag Appropriations Subcommittee is **Sen. Jeff Merkley from Oregon**.

**Senator Lisa Murkowski** of Alaska will take over as chair of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. She is a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Alaskan and the first Alaskan-born Senator to serve the state, where she has served as Senator since 2002. It's no secret that Sen. Murkowski's top priority will be energy development. She unveiled her plan almost two years ago: [Energy 2020: a Vision for America's Energy Future](#), which calls for opening up federal lands for energy exploration among other initiatives. However, **Sen. Maria Cantwell from Washington**, expected to be the committee's ranking member, will run strong opposition to the chair's proposals. Murkowski's committee also has jurisdiction over most of the federal land management agencies, but don't expect much camaraderie between her and Interior Secretary Sally Jewell as they have already disagreed on a proposed road through a remote Alaskan wildlife refuge that the Senator considers a life-and-death issue for local residents. Either way, Sen. Murkowski will play a huge role in shaping Energy and Natural Resource policy in the next session of Congress because not only will she be the top authorizer, she will also be the top appropriator for land management issues as chair of Senate Appropriations Subcommittee for Interior-Environment.

Finally, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee will have a 180 degree shift in its agenda when **Sen. Jim Inhofe from Oklahoma** takes over the gavel from **Barbara Boxer of California**, who will slide down to the ranking member spot. However, Sen. Inhofe will only be chair for 2 years under GOP rules since he chaired the committee from 2003 – 2007. You can expect an array of oversight hearings on Obama administration environmental policies such as expanding the scope of the Clean Water Act and the science underpinning federal environmental rules. Sen's Inhofe and Boxer are about as far apart as you can get on the ideological spectrum and there will be no shortage of polarizing drama within this committee over the next two years.

### **FY 2015 USDA Appropriations**

The last act of the 113th Congress before leaving town for the year was to pass the "Cromnibus", which funds the federal government for FY 2015. Things look pretty good for USDA budget items overall with NIFA, ARS, APHIS, NRCS, the Economic Research Service (ERS), and National Ag Statistics Service (NASS) all receiving higher budgets compared to FY 2014. The ERS received the largest increase among the aforementioned agencies with a 9.4 percent increase over last year to \$85.37 million. Within NIFA, the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) grants program increased 2.8% from \$316 million to \$325 million. Meanwhile, FY 2015 funding for the Hatch Act (\$244 million), Smith Lever 3b and 3c (\$300 million), and the IR-4 program (\$11.9 million) remain the same as last year. The Crop Protection and Pest

Management line item, which includes funding for Extension IPM and the Regional IPM Centers among other things, received a small increase from \$17.14 million to \$17.2 million.

### **Congress Ditches WOTUS Interpretive Rule, But Administrative Rule Still Moving Forward**

EPA and Army Corp of Engineers jointly published an “[administrative rule](#)” meant to clarify what are “Waters Of The United States” (WOTUS) and an “[interpretive rule](#)” meant to clarify which NRCS practices are exempt from Clean Water Act (CWA) permits for dredge and fill material under CWA 404(f)(1)(A). The proposed administrative rule would greatly expand the “waters” covered under the Clean Water Act to almost all waters in the United States. This would subject thousands of streams, ditches, and other “small” waters to federal permitting and citizen lawsuits, including those on agricultural property. When Congress passed the CWA in 1972, their intent was for the CWA to cover “navigable waters of the United States”. The expanded jurisdiction and the imprecision of the terms used by EPA and the Army Corp will result in significant added legal and regulatory costs. To try to minimize the potential effect on agriculture, EPA issued the “interpretive rule” at the same time as the “administrative rule” on WOTUS, which specifies 56 NRCS conservation practices that farmers must do to qualify for the CWA exemptions for dredge and fill permits. However, this “interpretive rule” only added confusion since agricultural storm water runoff and irrigation return flows are already exempt from CWA permitting. NRCS has more than a 160 approved conservation practices. Would the remaining 104 NRCS conservation practices still be considered normal farming practices? Or would they be subject to CWA citizen lawsuits under the administration’s new WOTUS rule? Thankfully Congress “ditched” EPA’s interpretive rule of NRCS approved conservation practices with a rider in the “Cromnibus” that was passed on Dec. 12. However, the “administrative rule” that greatly expands EPA’s authority under the CWA is still moving forward. EPA Administrator McCarthy has said that the CWA exemptions for ag storm water runoff and irrigation return flow will be upheld. We’ll see. The bottom line is that EPA and the Army Corp of Engineers will very likely move forward to finalize their “administrative rule” this spring. However, the new 114<sup>th</sup> Congress will certainly have something to say about this, as well as the President’s veto pen. Stay tuned.

### **Has Milkweed Declined 90 Percent in the Past 20 Years?**

On December 31, the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) said it’s considering increasing protections for the monarch butterfly under the Endangered Species Act (ESA). FWS was petitioned by three environmental groups last August that claim that extensive use of glyphosate on glyphosate resistant corn and soybeans in the Midwest has devastated native populations of milkweed, the sole source of food for monarch butterfly larvae. The petitioners claim that monarch butterfly populations have decreased 90 percent over the past 20 years. FWS will be accepting comments and data submissions on the state of the monarch butterfly until March 2, 2015. You can find the petition information and submit comments at [www.Regulations.gov](http://www.Regulations.gov) under Docket No. FWS-R3-ES-2014-0056.

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