

2021 Outlook: Agriculture

Overview

After nearly a week of awaiting election results, former Vice President Joe Biden has been declared President-Elect. Democrats will likely retain control of the House, although with a narrowed majority, and the Senate will await a runoff in Georgia that will determine which party will be in control.

Democratic control of the White House will significantly shift the Congressional approach to agriculture, nutrition, and trade policy issues. The Senate Agriculture Committee and the Appropriations Committees in both the House and Senate will have new leadership and addressing climate change, nutrition programs, and support for small and minority farmers will likely take priority. The election outcome also emboldens nutrition assistance policy changes, including a widely-pushed-for 15 percent increase in SNAP benefits in response to pandemic-related economic needs. President-elect Biden will work closely with the 117th Congress to achieve many of the agriculture policy priorities he outlined during his campaign. In addition to the aforementioned, Biden's agriculture priorities include investment in research and development, expanding farmworker protection through changes to the H-2A visa program and providing wage and union protections, and an additional \$20 billion investment to expand rural broadband and network deployment. While Biden's trade priorities are less defined, U.S. relations with China will remain a top priority, including fulfillment of the Phase One trade deal, albeit Biden's approach and process on confronting China will shift to seek coordination with U.S. allies.

It is difficult to predict potential Biden appointments as the campaign did not release any preliminary short-lists. The transition for USDA is being led by former USDA official, Robert Bonnie. Rumors regarding Biden's Secretary of Agriculture have centered around former Senator Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), Representative Cheri Bustos (D-IL), and Representative Marcia Fudge (D-OH). Other potential candidates include former Deputy Secretaries of Agriculture Kathleen Merrigan and Krysta Hardin, former President of the American National Farmers Union Tom Buis, and Congressman Collin Peterson, after his narrow loss to Republican Michelle Fischbach.

President-elect Biden has also said he plans to direct sweeping changes across federal agencies, which could include appointing a climate and energy czar. While a list of candidates has not been formalized, former Secretary of State John Kerry and former Bill Clinton adviser John Podesta are likely among those being considered for the possible position.

Key Takeaways

- New Chairs of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees
- Agriculture Committees will begin to consider Farm bill priorities
- New Chair for the House Appropriations Committee
- New Secretary of Agriculture

Moving into the lame duck session, Congress has several legislative deadlines, including FY 2021 appropriations. The House has passed ten of the twelve appropriations bills, while the Senate has not passed any. The Senate will likely begin the appropriations process immediately upon their return as the Continuing Resolution expires on December 11. Other upcoming legislative items include reauthorization of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, National Defense Authorization (NDAA), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, and Child Care Entitlements to States (CCES), and health extenders. Additionally, Congress will work to pass another Coronavirus stimulus package. However, there is a likelihood that final action on these legislative to do's will be delayed until after regime change.

Authorization Committee - Senate

Under Republican control, and with the retirement of Sen. Pat Roberts (R-KS), Sen. John Boozman (R-AR) will likely take the gavel. You can expect Chairman Boozman, Ranking Member Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), and all Members of the committee to push for an on-time passage of the next farm bill. Although there have been discussions of an early farm bill re-authorization, an earlier enactment would be difficult. Under a Chairman Boozman, early farm bill hearings and discussions will likely revolve around market disruptions in the cattle industry, bolstering the food supply chain, and competition in the packing industry. Look for continued focus on commodity programs, disaster relief, crop insurance and risk management programs, nutrition, and trade. With a Republican majority, overall committee focus will likely remain stable.

If Democrats take control of the Senate, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) is expected to become Chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee and Sen. John Boozman (R-AR) is expected to be Ranking Member. Under Democratic control, expect to see Chairwoman Stabenow emphasize some of the priorities she's been pushing as Ranking Member. Expect the committee to focus on specialty crops, urban agriculture, dairy, increased investment in organic, rural development (particularly broadband access), strengthening diversity, emboldened nutrition assistance programs, and providing transparency and trust in biotech innovations. Of course, an overarching emphasis of climate change/new green deal will greatly influence the Committee with interest in conservation and effects on bioenergy. With Democratic control, you can also expect increased representation from states representing urban agriculture areas and those producing specialty crops.

Authorization Committee - House

With the loss of current House Agriculture Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN), a Democratic House will elect a new chair. Reps. David Scott (D-GA), Marcia Fudge (D-OH), and Jim Costa (D-CA) are possibilities, and both Reps. Scott and Costa have already officially announced their bid. Additionally, with the retirement of Ranking Member Michael Conaway (R-TX), the senior Republican slot will be passed to another senior GOP member on the Committee. Reps. Glenn

'GT' Thompson (R-PA), Austin Scott (R-GA), and Rick Crawford (R-AR) are all declared candidates for the next Ranking Member.

The 116th Congress was focused greatly on farm bill implementation given its recent enactment in 2018, and USDA's trade mitigation and Covid responses. It is expected that the legislative agenda for the 117th Congress will continue a focus on implementation but with a same party USDA oversight will be greatly reduced. The Committee is expected to shift to laying the groundwork for the new farm bill in 2023. An odd year 2023 farm bill is one that would normally span two Congresses, which is felt more acutely in the House with its two-year election cycle than in the Senate with six-year terms. Farm bill hearings will begin in 2022, but final enactment usually occurs closer to expiration (or after) which is generally September 30, 2023. Although Congress is expected to follow its usual reauthorization schedule, there have been rumors of reauthorizing the farm bill early. The House will focus on similar issues as in the Senate, such as rural development, nutrition, diversity, concentration, along with an increased focus addressing climate change with conservation programs. In addition, the effects of other climate change initiatives such as electric cars on renewable energy is expected to be of interest. The 117th Congress will prioritize passing a mostly streamlined child nutrition reauthorization bill, a process that has been roadblocked for several years.

[Appropriations Committee - Senate](#)

Whether the Senate remains in GOP control or Democrats take over, look for stability on the full Senate Appropriations Committee with Sens. Richard Shelby (R-AL) and Patrick Leahy (D-VT) staying in leadership positions. However, we will likely see movement on the Senate Appropriations Subcommittees with the retirement of Sen. Lamar Alexander (R-TN).

The Senate Appropriations Committee will work to pass all twelve FY 2021 appropriations bills during the lame duck session. Pairing the Agriculture appropriations bill with the Military Construction-Veterans Affairs, Commerce-Justice-Science, Transportation-HUD, and Interior-Environment Appropriations bill worked successfully for FY 2020 and a similar package comprised of the FY 2021 State-Foreign Operations, Agriculture, Interior, and Military Construction, Veterans Affairs bills has already passed the House. Although a "clear the deck" strategy to start fresh in anticipation of a new regime has been followed in the past, a delay and holding pattern is also possible.

If Democrats gain a majority, expect to see Agriculture appropriations priorities shift towards increased support for organic, environmental stewardship, land conservation and preservation, and federal nutrition programs.

Appropriations Committee - House

Although Democrats maintain leadership of the House, expect a change in full committee leadership as Chairwoman Nita Lowey (D-NY) retires. Currently, Reps. Marcy Kaptur (D-OH), Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), and Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) look like potential replacements. Rep. Kay Granger (R-TX) will likely remain Ranking Member. Also expect to see consistency in the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee leadership with Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) as Chairman and Rep. Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) as Ranking Member.

Expect to see similar appropriations priorities with continued Democratic control of the House during the 117th Congress. The Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee will likely continue to increase investment in infrastructure and rural development, agricultural research, diversity, conservation programs that help combat climate change, and domestic and international food programs that promote food security.