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# Congressional & Administration News

**What to Know in Washington: Standoff Over Small Business Funds**

April 10, 2020

Democrats are holding firm to their demand that a $250 billion economic stimulus for small businesses must include more funds for hospitals, states and localities struggling with the coronavirus pandemic, leaving congressional leaders at a standoff for now.

There were no immediate plans for negotiations among Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.) and other top leaders after Democrats yesterday rejected McConnell’s bid to pass only the funds for the Paycheck Protection Program for small businesses.

Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin requested approval of the $250 billion by week’s end, but Democratic leaders in both chambers insisted on supplementing those funds with $100 billion for hospitals and $150 billion for state and local governments.

Hospitals and localities “are hemorrhaging money and paying for the coronavirus costs,” Pelosi said on CNBC’s “Mad Money” program. She said there’s “plenty of room for negotiation.”

The dispute raised questions about when Congress would be able to act. Senate rules require unanimous consent to pass anything quickly, giving any one senator the ability to gum up the works.

If leaders find a path forward, Monday may be the next chance to quickly approve more aid in the Senate without objection. Lawmakers aren’t scheduled to return to Washington until the week of April 20.

**What to Watch**

The House will meet for a pro forma session at 9 a.m.

The White House will hold a Coronavirus Task Force press briefing at 1 p.m.

**Economic Actions & Industry Pains**

**S&P 500 Posts Best Week Since 1974:**Markets this week were energized by progress in efforts to stem the spread of the coronavirus and the Federal Reserve’s measures to cushion the economic fallout. The S&P 500 Index surged 12% -- its biggest weekly advance since 1974 -- while the Dow Jones Industrial Average gained 13% and the Nasdaq Composite Index 11%. Still, the S&P 500 and Dow are down double-digits this year, while the Nasdaq has pared losses to 9%.

**Pence, CDC Head Lay Out Virus Criteria to Reopen U.S.:** Vice President Mike Pence and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Director Robert Redfield said reopening the country’s economy hinges on the government seeing major communities at the end of their coronavirus outbreaks and developing treatments for the disease, among other hurdles. The country also should have widespread testing available, therapeutics for Americans who contract the disease, and guidance from the CDC on how large and small businesses can operate safely, Pence said last night at a White House briefing.

Redford later in an interview on CNN said officials need to understand the spread of the virus, strengthen public health infrastructure, prepare hospitals and other medical facilities, and foster a belief among Americans that it’s the right time to do this.

Meanwhile, The White House is considering whether to create a working group focused on reviving the U.S. economy after the coronavirus pandemic eases, and whether the panel should include private-sector representatives. The new group would be separate from the coronavirus task force led by Pence, even though it may include some of the same members.

The discussions are in their early stages, according to three people familiar with the matter. White House Chief of Staff Mark Meadows has also asked Trump’s daughter and senior adviser Ivanka Trump to join the group, one person said. All of the people spoke on condition of anonymity because the discussions are ongoing.

**Defense Contractors Keep Most Plants Running:**The Pentagon’s contractors have largely avoided widespread closings or “major impacts” so far from the coronavirus pandemic, according to a running tally compiled by its contracts management office. Of 10,509 locations tracked or monitored by the Defense Contract Management Agency, 135 had closed at some point as of Wednesday. Forty-nine of those reopened after an average of about 10 days.

“These closures have generally been short-term in order to clean facilities” or to “reduce the potential exposure of employees,” agency spokesman Matthew Montgomery said in a statement. The agency doesn’t track how many workers are affected, he said. And the numbers on closings don’t reflect defense contractors that have cut back their operations -- or the outsized impact of Boeing’s shutdowns.

**Growing Number of Pilots Grounded:**Hundreds of pilots and flight attendants at major U.S. airlines have tested positive for coronavirus infection, according to unions representing the workers. They’re part of an increasing number of in-flight workers who are being sidelined by the coronavirus. Airline flight crews should be considered first responders with priority for protective equipment, a spokesman for the Allied Pilots Association said. Airlines also need to beef up health screenings for crews and passengers, including priority testing for crew members, said the spokesman, whose union represents about 15,000 pilots at American Airlines.

* Trump said he may unveil a bailout proposal for the beleaguered U.S. airline industry this weekend. The president said at a White House briefing that he met with Mnuchin and Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao to work on details of the proposal. Airlines have been frustrated by delays in U.S. aid after being virtually shutdown by the coronavirus. Some of those carriers are depending on federal funds to meet payroll obligations next week and face the prospect of furloughing workers. Read more from Mario Parker.

**Farm Aid Seen Next Week:** Trump said in a tweet last night he has asked his agriculture secretary to “use all of the funds and authorities at his disposal,” to aid U.S. farmers, whose financial peril has worsened in the coronavirus pandemic. The administration plans to announce an aid package next week, according to people familiar with the discussions. Trump’s tweets did not provide specifics, but the coronavirus relief bill Congress passed last month includes $23.5 billion in aid for farmers. So far, it hasn’t been clear how all of those funds will be distributed. 

**Research, Treatment & Coordination**

**States Lash Out at FEMA Over Supplies:**The fierce competition for crucial medical supplies is fueling confusion and suspicions between the states and federal government over conflicting priorities and drawing allegations of political favoritism by the Trump administration.

In Colorado, the tension boiled over when the state tried to secure ventilators for an expected spike in critically ill patients. Colorado Gov. Jared Polis (D) made a direct plea to Pence late last month for help in securing 10,000 ventilators and millions of masks and other protective equipment. When that request went unfulfilled, the state bought 500 ventilators from a private contractor. But the Federal Emergency Management Agency also needed the ventilators. The agency used its authority to jump to the front of the line, according to Colorado officials, and purchased the equipment.

It’s a situation being played out around the country as governors complain of shortages, delays and confusing demands as they try to supply hospitals beset by critically ill patients.

* House Energy and Commerce Chairman Frank Pallone (D-N.J.) blasted FEMA for issuing an advisory yesterday requiring states to petition the federal government to continue supporting certain testing sites by the end of the day. Pallone asked the Trump administration to give states more time to decide if they want to take over managing Community-Based Testing Sites that the federal government has so far run and used to test nearly 80,000 Americans. Read the statement here.

**Pentagon Sends First Body Bags:**The Pentagon has delivered 37,000 body bags over the last week to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which is seeking 100,000 to help address the pandemic. The Defense Logistics Agency provided what the military calls “human remain pouches” from a combination of its stockpile and expedited shipments from its current provider. In addition, the agency placed orders for 63,000 more of the bags to fulfill the remainder of FEMA’s request, Patrick Mackin, a DLA spokesman, said yesterday in an email. 

**Foreign Affairs**

**Trump Touts Tentative Russia-Saudi Pact:**Trump said a tentative agreement between Riyadh and Moscow to cut global oil production is a “very acceptable agreement.” The two nations are “getting close to a deal,” Trump said yesterday. Trump held a conference call with with Russia’s Vladimir Putin and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman just before the remarks. “It was a very good call.” Russia and Saudi Arabia agreed in principle to slash oil production, a move that could help U.S. producers that were devastated by the two countries’ month-long price war.

**Virus Disinformation by Russia, China:**The Justice Department is tracking disinformation campaigns worldwide by Russia and China aimed at sowing divisions over the coronavirus crisis, according to John Demers, head of the department’s national security division. The disinformation operations could fuel confusion and division in the U.S. and other Western countries, Demers said yesterday. The Russian government’s objective appears to be aimed at weakening the EU and NATO, in ways parallel to the Kremlin’s effort to interfere in the 2016 U.S. election, he said

**UN Chief Urges Pandemic Action:**United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres urged members of the Security Council to come together to fight the global coronavirus outbreak, marking the first time the divided 15-nation body discussed the pandemic. “The engagement of the Security Council will be critical to mitigate the peace and security implications of the Covid-19 pandemic,” said Guterres in a closed-door video conference. “A signal of unity and resolve from the Council would count for a lot at this anxious time,” he said in a text released by his office.

**What Else to Know Today**

**Fiscal 2021 Spending Bills Move Forward:**Top House appropriators have received preliminary top-line spending figures for their fiscal 2021 bills and are remotely drafting legislation to fund the government past Sept. 30, even as the coronavirus complicates their work.

Several key lawmakers have suggested amending last year’s two-year budget caps agreement to exempt certain programs from spending limits, which could allow for a boost to biomedical programs without triggering cuts elsewhere. For now, though, House Appropriations Chairwoman Nita Lowey (D-N.Y.) has assigned subcommittee leaders top-line allocations, and the committee plans to hold markups “when Congress returns to Washington,” Evan Hollander, Lowey’s spokesman, said in a statement yesterday. Jack Fitzpatrick has the latest update on the state of FY21 spending work.

**Worries That Coronavirus-Prompted Rule Changes Go Too Far:** State and federal governments are using the ongoing global pandemic to pursue deregulation and political priorities, a trend that has prompted protests. Some of the rule changes are based on common sense—like allowing hand sanitizers of up to 12 ounces on airplanes—while others are seen as threats to public health and safety. And most contain elements of both, raising hard questions about how far the government should go when it comes to fighting a deadly virus.

There are instances where it makes sense to roll back or ease regulations, said Amit Narang, a regulatory policy advocate at Public Citizen. But there is a limit, particularly when it comes to the environment. “On the EPA side, we’re seeing the oil and gas industry pushing for basically short-term extensions across the board on pollution regulations,” he said.

**Biden’s Overtures to Sanders:**A day after Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) dropped out of the presidential race, former Vice President Joe Biden signaled support for two new progressive policies as he seeks to unite the Democratic Party around him. Biden said he supported lowering the Medicare eligibility age to 60 from 65 and forgiving student debt for low-income and middle-class individuals who have attended public colleges and universities.

“Senator Sanders and his supporters can take pride in their work in laying the groundwork for these ideas, and I’m proud to adopt them as part of my campaign at this critical moment in responding to the coronavirus crisis,” Biden said in a statement.

**N.H. Judge Strikes Down Registration Law:**A controversial New Hampshire voter registration law backed by Gov. Chris Sununu (R) was struck down yesterday as unconstitutional. Superior Court Judge David Anderson ruled that the 2017 law placed an unreasonable burden on the right to vote and violated equal protection under the state’s constitution. People who wanted to register to vote within 30 days of an election had to provide residency documents under the law that otherwise wouldn’t be required.

**Texas Abortion Ban Narrowed:** Some abortions in Texas will be permitted to resume under an Austin judge’s ruling narrowing the scope of a temporary ban enacted by the state to conserve medical resources during the pandemic. The court order lets clinics perform medication abortions that don’t require masks and gloves as well as surgical abortions for women whose pregnancies will be too advanced by the time the governor’s ban expires. The clinics said they have had to turn away hundreds of patients since Texas clamped down.

U.S. District Judge Lee Yeakel’s latest order risks drawing a second rebuke from the New Orleans-based federal appeals court, which on April 7 blasted him for siding with the clinics in their challenge to Texas Gov. Greg Abbott’s (R) directive March 22 to preserve hospital beds and personal protective gear for treating Covid-19 patients. Yeakel said his order expires on April 19 unless he extends it.

**Economists See Flaws in Plan to Gut Pollution Rule:** By proposing to obliterate the legal justification for restricting toxic mercury pollution from power plants, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has flouted bedrock practices that have driven federal policymaking for decades, according to a group of resource economists writing in the journal *Science*.

**Border Patrol’s Texas Tent Facility:**A temporary Customs and Border Patrol tent facility in Texas was over-staffed, underutilized and cost the federal government millions in unneeded food services during a five-month period, according to a government watchdog report. “CBP paid approximately $66 million in total for the facility services and leveraged significant federal personnel resources,” despite “holding an average of 30 detainees per day—about 1 percent of the facility’s capacity,” the Government Accountability Office said in a report released yesterday.

**Democrats Want Child Migrant Deportations Halted**: House Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson (D-Miss.) and Border Security Subcommittee Chairwoman Kathleen Rice (D-N.Y.) in a letter to the Department of Homeland Security said the department cannot deport unaccompanied child migrants without legal due process despite border restrictions implemented during the pandemic. A policy change the department informed the committee of April 2 to deport more migrant children who arrived without parents or legal guardians is also illegal, the Democrats said.

# Agriculture News

**What Are Farmers Thinking About AG Tech During Covid-19?**

April 10, 2020 – Successful Farming

Many of the world’s leading industries are grinding to a halt as governments across the globe attempt to thwart the further spread of Covid-19. Industries that involve bringing large numbers of people together physically are bearing the brunt, including sporting events, restaurants, education, and tourism. But there are a few that have been deemed essential to everyday life, including healthcare, emergency services, food manufacturing, and farming.

In uncertain times, there are a few things that are certain; farmers will soon be planting new crops in the Northern Hemisphere and harvesting in the South, livestock will continue to eat and produce offspring, and people will continue to eat. How these different activities come to bear might be different, but they cannot be canceled altogether like a conference or a college football game.

As farmers face new and in some cases unprecedented challenges, how will their approach to technology use and adoption change? And what role can technology play as farmers grapple with the new realities of a socially-distanced and economically struggling world?

**PLANTING DURING FINANCIAL UNCERTAINTY**

As with people working in other industries, farmers are also contending with a lack of childcare in the wake of school closures, concern for and looking after high-risk family members, or a dip in household income from losing off-farm jobs in other industries. Labor shortages are another shared challenge across multiple industries with farming being no exception.

On top of this, producers are facing a volatile market for their goods — check out how just some ag commodity prices have changed in the past month here — and an uncertain financial future.

Illinois farmer Steve Pitstick and his family business partners are roughly two weeks from the start of the ever-important planting season. The rent has been paid, the seed purchased, and plans made. Like with many farming families, plans for the next season often start when they set the combine down after harvest. The family-run operation produces feed-grade corn and soy across 12,000 acres. Pitstick says the pandemic has had little impact on his day-to-day operations, other than stocking up on parts he may need during planting and spending more time at home.

The family is firm in its decision to proceed with planting-as-usual, but many producers are either reducing their planned output for this year or halting production altogether due to uncertainties about future demand during the pandemic. Changing course just weeks before planting is no easy feat, but with indications about where demand and therefore pricing is moving for certain commodities — plummeting corn prices on the back of low ethanol demand due to the glut of fuel from the transport industry is a clear example — it’s a serious consideration for those that can be nimble.

And, while these decisions might not be felt for a while, Pitstick argues that the sudden fluctuations in supply and demand will ripple out for months to come. He examples pork chops:

“[The US] got really efficient with our supply chain, knowing how many pork chops were getting eaten each week and how many pigs were needed to be raised to achieve that,” Pitstick explains. “But there’s a 10-to-11 month period between breeding and when that pig goes to market. Right now, the freezers are full because people aren’t eating out anymore, school meals aren’t being served, etc. People don’t eat chicken wings or short ribs at home. But because people are halting production to cope with the oversupply, there will eventually be a hole in the food system and things will be in short supply.”

**LOW-COST AND COST-SAVING ARE KEY**

Asking farmers like Pitstick whether they plan to keep purchasing new ag tech tools almost seems silly after this exchange. The family describes themselves as early adopters of ag tech, implementing innovations starting back in the 1990s. But now, he has little interest in exploring new gadgets and discretionary spending is out of the question including everything from new tractor tires to the latest gadgets.

“Depending on how the economy shakes out, there’s no room for extras and unproven technology. We are just doing the bare minimum now like autosteer because it has a definite ROI [return on investment]. All the new stuff is fluffy and I can farm without it. We can all revert back to the old days really fast and that may be what we have to do to financially survive this situation.”

For farmers who are still keeping an eye on potential technologies to facilitate their operations, low-cost tools that are easy to use will likely garner the most attention, according to Pat Rogers, a South Carolina commodities farmer and founder of agriculture social networking site AgFuse.

“I’m not sure that the coronavirus outbreak moves the needle one way or the other regarding farmer’s attitudes toward AgTech,” Rogers told *AFN*. “I do sense that there is heightened concern over things like supply chain issues and potential labor issues because of the virus. In that regard, the adoption of productivity, organization, and information gathering tools could potentially accelerate.”

As Thomas Edison said, however, “Opportunity is missed by most people because it is dressed in overalls and looks like work.”

For some startups, the pressures that COVID-19 brings to farm production could be the perfect opportunity for technology to shine, particularly if there’s a cost-saving.

“There could be some benefits in some cases where it solidifies itself on the farm,” Shane Thomas, an agronomist and columnist who currently works for Farmers Edge, tells *AFN*. “There may be more scrutiny where the technology is adopted and whether it will be actively and aggressively used versus technologies that are adopted under a ‘we will give it a try and see how it goes’ mentality. An example might be sensor technology like moisture probes, which have an upfront cost, but using it effectively could save further dollars in-season through irrigation management or top dressing decisions.”

**FOR SMALL FARMERS, TECHNOLOGY MEETS OPPORTUNITY**

While commodity-scale farmers brace for uncertainty, some small farmers are seeing an unexpected silver lining amid the chaos. As grocery store shelves are being emptied faster than they can replenish and supply chains hit with countless delays or outright stoppages, local farmers have found themselves uniquely poised to feed the hungry masses.

“They are now seeing a spike in demand and need to meet it,” Dan Miller, founder and CEO of sustainable farming investment platform Steward told *AFN*. “The type of farm that we support on our platform is a diversified operation that sells direct-to-consumer. That’s what everyone wants now. High-quality farm products sourced directly from the farmer. We helped one of our farmers set up an e-commerce platform last week. There are a lot of operational systems that are needed now to help them manage the high volume. Not all farms are ready for that.”

As well as connecting investors with small-scale farms, Steward also provides business coaching for farmers on its platform, which has become more important than ever for farmers who want to harness Covid-19’s invigoration of interest in local food. Many small-scale farmers who direct market locally rely on interpersonal relationships to market and sell products; farmers’ markets are a prime example. The sudden need to meet consumers’ demand for e-commerce options has left many scrambling for solutions. For less tech-savvy farmers, this creates serious headaches.

But for those willing to jump on the digital bandwagon, the opportunity to capture increased sales, attract new customers, and convert one-off buyers to long-term buyers is attractive.

“Before Covid-19, we were starting to lean towards incorporating more technology into our systems,” Amy Eckert of Fisheye Farms, a diversified farming operation in Chicago tells *AFN*. “However, for the past two weeks, the majority of our sales have been to individual households through our Friday Farmstand, so the most appealing technology to us has been getting the online store up and running. It will make our lives easier to be able to pre-pack peoples’ orders, have them pick it up, and not have to fuss with lines, accepting cash, etc.”

**GOOD ADVICE WELL TAKEN**

As any established e-commerce player will tell you, however, building a food business over the internet is not akin to a Field of Dreams “If you build it, they will come” ethos. One only has to skim the meal kit space’s graveyard to know that logistics, operational costs, and consumer churn are formidable foes.

“Advice that I would give to farmers launching e-commerce platforms is to have diversity,” Paul Greives, founder and VP of Sales & Marketing at Southern California pastured poultry company Pasture Bird, tells *AFN*. Although some of the business’ wholesale accounts like restaurants and corporate cafeterias dried up, its butcher shops, meal prep companies, and online grocery outlets are soaring. And some of his direct-to-consumer farmer colleagues are reporting up to five-fold increases in sales.

Building a diversified sales channel like that was advice well-taken.

“When we were first entering the business, the vice president of Newport Meats George Yueh told me, ‘It’s better to hit 100 singles than one big home run.’ Even though it’s a slower way to go, we’ve really benefited from that advice, building resilience through a diversity of sales channels.  It’s funny because it’s really similar to what we preach when building pasture health as well. Huge monocrops are subject to all sorts of bacteria, pests, disease – but the rainforest is resilient.”

“The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn’t still be a farmer.” — Will Rogers

Tom Oswald, a farmer and host of the United Soybean Board’s Tech Toolshed, reminds *AFN* that farmers were already facing low prices, an onslaught of catastrophic weather events during 2019, and trade wars. There wasn’t a lot of room for investing in cutting-edge technology before Covid-19.

But the old tropes about farmers’ work ethics, stubbornness, and ingenuity are more fact than fiction. With a dismal financial future ahead, farmers are going to have to dig deep within their existing operations, which may include exploring existing agtech tools that have been left unexplored to date.

“I would suggest that the pandemic is going to show us how we can use the tools that we already have,” Oswald explained. “I think it’s increasing awareness of some of the tech we have but haven’t really deployed yet. My personal philosophy is that innovative people can’t help but be innovative. It’s in their blood. Like how farmers will figure out a way to get the crop in the ground.”

# Federal Employee News

**Federal Employee Safety Could be Addressed in Next Virus-Response Bill**

April 7, 2020- Fedweek

White House and Congressional leaders have signaled interest in quickly enacting another Coronavirus relief bill – what would be the fourth – providing another opportunity to enact proposals designed to better protect and compensate federal employees.

While the measure likely would focus mainly on financial relief to individuals and businesses, the continued health concerns for federal employees, especially those in public-facing jobs, could open the way for adding policy changes, as well.

While there is no official count of the number of federal employees who have contracted the virus, reports from just several individual agencies add up to the many hundreds, and there have been at least three confirmed virus-related deaths—two postal employees and a TSA screener.

With Congress on an extended recess that won’t end until April 20, backers of several federal workplace-related provisions from an earlier House proposal will have time to work to incorporate them into the next bill—in contrast to the prior relief bill, which was crafted by the Senate with the House in recess, with the House briefly reconvening just to pass it.

Those provisions would mandate telework by any employee deemed eligible; weather and safety leave for employees prevented from going to their regular work locations but who cannot telework; and hazardous duty pay for employees exposed in the line of duty to persons with COVID-19 or who have been exposed to the Coronavirus. Other provisions would pay up to $2,000 a month to employees who are required to work and incur expenses related to the care of a child or relative who has COVID-19; and create a presumption that an employee carrying out duties that require substantial contact with the public who contract the virus would be eligible for FECA benefits.

In the weeks since those proposals first arose, agencies have continued to increase their use of telework and at least some have been paying weather and safety leave.

Agencies also continue to close buildings – or parts of them, such as day care centers – either completely or just to the public, and DoD for example has issued a general policy that its civilian employees among others in its facilities wear face coverings in settings where they cannot maintain the CDC-recommended six feet of social distancing.

However, federal employees and their organizations continue to raise alarms about lack of protective equipment and cleaning, employees being compelled to continue coming to worksites when they could work remotely, and working conditions that put them in close contact with each other or members of the public.

Most recently, the AFGE union filed OSHA complaints alleging numerous workplace safety violations by the VA and the Bureau of Prisons, and the NTEU union protested the CBP’s decision to cancel an earlier-agreed reduction in the amount of time employees spend in contact with the public and each other.

Meanwhile, there apparently has been no actual use an authority created by one of the earlier virus-related laws, the “Families First” Act, which allows for an additional two weeks of paid sick leave, up to dollar limits, under certain conditions related to the virus.

The Labor Department, which is overseeing that provision in general, has said that many federal employees would qualify for that benefit, which was to be effective April 1, although it has not been specific. Also, OPM still has not issued guidance on the practical aspects of applying for and using that leave.

**OPM: Higher Incentive Pay Possible for COVID-19 Response**

April 7, 2020 - Fedweek

OPM has told agencies that they may request a waiver of the normal limits on recruitment, relocation, and retention incentives “to address a critical agency need, such as agency programs or projects related to the President’s declaration of a national emergency concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.”

“Agencies may request OPM approval of an incentive waiver for a single position or for a group of positions,” it said, adding that in making a request agencies need not provide a highly detailed justification, only that “a case can be made that the position(s) would likely be difficult to fill (for recruitment and relocation incentives) or employees would be likely to leave (for retention incentives) during this national emergency.”

Without OPM approval, agencies may pay recruitment or relocation incentives of up to 25 percent of an employee’s annual rate of basic pay times the number of years in a service agreement (not to exceed 4 years or 100 percent of annual basic pay); retention incentives for an individual of up to 25 percent of the employee’s rate of basic pay; and retention incentives of up to 10 percent of basic pay to a group or category of employees.

However, agencies may further request authority from OPM to pay incentives of up to 50 percent in the case of critical agency needs.

OPM has not issued a report on usage of the incentives since one showing that about 43,000 federal employees received them in 2009, with several occupations in the medical field—positions always in top demand for federal agencies and especially so now—among those most commonly receiving the payments.