

Public Policy Update

A First Glimpse at the 2008 Farm Bill

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After numerous starts and stops, various extensions of current law, and a Presidential veto, the House and the Senate by wide margins overrode one of the few vetoes of the Bush Administration and enacted the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, commonly called the “Farm Bill,” in May. Well, at least most of the Farm Bill has become law. In an interesting last minute twist, the trade title of the Farm Bill was inadvertently left out of the conference agreement that was sent to the President, so he actually vetoed a bill that was not exactly what Congress had passed. However, Congress acted quickly and clarified the mistake. Over the next year, the USDA will spend millions of dollars to implement the various changes to agricultural law, including all of the laws that authorize funding for research programs at the Department of Agriculture.

The Farm Bill, generally, does not provide direct funding for research programs; rather, it does authorize the level of funding for those programs. Before funds can be appropriated for a program or for salaries for the personnel to implement the program, a law must be enacted to authorize the program and any expenditures related to the program. In some cases, the authorization is for such funds as Congress deems necessary; in other cases, the authorization is for appropriations up to a certain limit. However, even if appropriations are authorized, it does not mean that the program will receive any funding. For funding to be available for the program, an appropriation for the specific program must be enacted as well, so the Farm Bill is just the beginning.

While several aspects of the Farm Bill may have a direct impact on plant pathology and on funding for research, one of the 15 titles in the Farm Bill, title VII, addresses most of the agricultural research and extension programs at the USDA. The bill makes major changes to the administration and operations of the research programs at the USDA. The effect of some of the changes will not become clear until the implementation process begins. A few of the major changes are discussed briefly here.

After 14 years, Congress has again changed the structure of research programs at the USDA

and, over the next year, the new shape of USDA research programs will come into focus. Significantly, the bill provides that as of October 1, 2009, the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) will go out of existence as all of its programs will be transferred to a new entity—the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). NIFA will be headed by a director, appointed by the President for a 6-year term. The director will report directly to the secretary of agriculture and will work with the under secretary for research, education, and economics (REE). In the statement of managers accompanying the bill, Congress stated that it intended for NIFA to be an independent, scientific, policy-setting agency for the food and agricultural sciences, which will reinvigorate our nation’s investment in agricultural research, extension, and education.

The bill replaces the National Research Initiative (NRI) and the Initiative for Future Agriculture and Food Systems (IFAFS) with a new program, titled the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), to award competitive grants for fundamental and applied research, extension, and education to address food and agricultural sciences. The program combines the priority areas of NRI with the purposes and priority areas of IFAFS. AFRI has the following priority areas: plant health and production and plant products; animal health and production and animal products; food safety, nutrition, and health; renewable energy, natural resources, and environment; agriculture systems and technology; and agriculture economics and rural communities.

Sixty percent of AFRI funds will be for fundamental research and 40% will be for applied research and 30% of AFRI funds must be used for integrated programs. The bill authorizes appropriations of up to \$700 million for AFRI; however, as noted above, this is merely an authorization and will require an appropriations act for funding. NRI, for example, has been authorized at \$500 million since its inception but appropriations have not reached half of that level.

The bill creates the Research, Extension, and Education Office (REEO) and places it within the office of the under secretary for REE. REEO will have six divisions.

- Renewable energy, natural resources, and environment
- Food safety, nutrition, and health
- Plant health and production and plant products

- Animal health and production and animal products
- Agriculture systems and technology
- Agriculture economics and rural communities

Division chiefs will be selected by the under secretary and will be able to serve a term of up to 4 years. The REEO divisions are charged with coordinating the research, extension, and education activities across the USDA.

The under secretary and REEO are directed to develop a road map to identify major opportunities and gaps in agricultural research, extension, and education and to use this road map to set the research agenda and recommend funding levels for programs in this mission area of the department.

More information on the implementation of the Farm Bill will be available over the next few months. In the meantime, if you have any questions or an interest in particular sections of the bill, please feel free to contact me at eversole@eversoleassociates.com. ■

