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ESA IN D.C.

*ESA Submits Comments on National Research Council Report on AFRI; Study Committee Holds Webinar with NIFA Director*

On January 5, ESA sent a letter to the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) Director Sonny Ramaswamy commenting on recommendations made by a committee of the National Academies Board on Agriculture and Natural Resources (BANR). Recommendations on how to improve the AFRI program were made in the committee’s report, *Spurring Innovation in Food and Agriculture: A Review of the USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative*, which was sponsored by NIFA and released last September. ESA’s letter was also shared with BANR and the study committee.

In its comments, ESA thanks the committee for its efforts and acknowledges the progress made under the leadership of Dr. Ramaswamy over the past two years in areas related to many of the report’s recommendations. The letter also applauds the report’s recommendation that the U.S. increase public investment in the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI). In its comments, ESA encourages a balanced AFRI program portfolio, allowing for support of basic
and applied research, extension, and training through strategic use of both individual-investigator and large awards.

On January 9, BANR held a webinar with members of the study committee and Dr. Ramaswamy to review the report and discuss NIFA’s plans for addressing the findings. Dr. Ramaswamy indicated that NIFA appreciated the report and agreed with the recommendations overall, particularly regarding issues of grant management, reporting systems, transparency and simplification, and the formation of a Scientific Advisory Council for AFRI. He also discussed steps that had already been taken since the beginning of his tenure, such as the reduction in the size of CAP grants from the previous $30-40 million to the current $5-15 million range and a roughly 40 percent increase in investment in foundational grants. Efforts are also being undertaken to increase the predictability of the release of Requests for Applications (RFA).

Dr. Ramaswamy also mentioned the need to collect more data on the agriculture workforce pipeline. He hopes to continue to work with BANR to study agriculture workforce needs in industry and academia and may pursue a workshop on the issue in the future.

Sources and Additional Information:


CONGRESSIONAL UPDATES AND NEWS

114th Congress Kicks Off

On January 6, the 114th U.S. Congress convened with new leadership in the Senate following the November elections in which Republicans gained control of the chamber. Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) is the new Senate Majority Leader, and Senator Harry Reid (D-NV) is now the Minority Leader. In the U.S. House of Representatives, Republicans strengthened their majority by winning new seats in the election. Despite some opposition from conservatives in his party, Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) was re-elected Speaker of the House. Representative Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) will continue to be House Minority Leader.
New Senate Committee Leadership Announced

With the start of the 114th Congress, the Senate began to finalize the selection of its committee leadership. Senate Republicans announced committee chairs and Senate Democrats chose committee ranking members. Below is a chart that displays the new leadership for several key Senate committees. Additionally, on January 29, Chairman Thad Cochran (R-MS) and Ranking Member Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) announced the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee rosters. The announcements bring the new Congress one step closer to finalizing the make-up of the congressional committees.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee</th>
<th>Chair</th>
<th>Ranking Member</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry</td>
<td>Pat Roberts (R-KS)</td>
<td>Debbie Stabenow (D-MI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Appropriations</td>
<td>Thad Cochran (R-MS)</td>
<td>Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Subcommittee on Commerce, Justice, Science and Related Agencies</td>
<td>Richard Shelby (R-AL)</td>
<td>Barbara Mikulski (D-MD)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration and Related Agencies</td>
<td>Jerry Moran (R-KS)</td>
<td>Jeff Merkley (D-OR)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Subcommittee on Energy and Water</td>
<td>Lamar Alexander (R-TN)</td>
<td>Dianne Feinstein (D-CA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies</td>
<td>Roy Blunt (R-MO)</td>
<td>Patty Murray (D-WA)</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Subcommittee on Interior, Environment and Related Agencies</td>
<td>Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)</td>
<td>Tom Udall (D-NM)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Armed Services</td>
<td>John McCain (R-AZ)</td>
<td>Jack Reed (D-RI)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Budget</td>
<td>Michael Enzi (R-WY)</td>
<td>Bernie Sanders (I-VT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Commerce, Science, and Transportation</td>
<td>John Thune (R-SD)</td>
<td>Bill Nelson (D-FL)</td>
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<td>Energy and Natural Resources</td>
<td>Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)</td>
<td>Maria Cantwell (D-AK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions</td>
<td>Lamar Alexander (R-TN)</td>
<td>Patty Murray (D-WA)</td>
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Sources and Additional Information:


Immigration Innovation (I-Squared) Act of 2015 Introduced in the Senate

On January 13, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) introduced the Immigration Innovation (I-Squared) Act of 2015 along with Senators Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Chris Coons (D-DE), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Jeff Flake (R-AZ), and Marco Rubio (R-FL). This bipartisan legislation was first introduced in the 113th Congress by Senators Hatch, Klobuchar, Rubio, and Coons and would increase the number of visas available for high-skilled or well-educated immigrants to lawfully reside and work in the United States.

Provisions of the legislation of interest to ESA include:

- The cap on H-1B visas would increase from 65,000 to 115,000, and an “escalator” formula would allow the cap to move up to 195,000 depending on the needs of industry and the economy. Universities and independent research institutes would remain exempt from the H-1B visa cap. The U.S. advanced degree exemption, which is currently capped at 20,000 per year, would also be uncapped.

- Congressionally-approved green cards that went unused in previous years would be recaptured. Going forward, future unused green cards would be rolled over to the next fiscal year. The legislation would exempt the following from the employment-based green card gap: “U.S. STEM advance degree holders; persons with extraordinary ability; outstanding professors and researchers.” (Note that this legislation defines a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) field as those listed on the “STEM Designated Degree Program List published by the Department of Homeland Security.” This list includes entomology and was modified in 2012 to include more fields in the agriculture and natural sciences.)

- A grant program would be established for states to improve STEM education and provide worker retraining through a portion of fees collected from industries taking advantage of the new H-1B visas and employment-based green cards.

- “Dual intent” would be allowed for student visas, permitting foreign students attending U.S. colleges and universities to enter the U.S. on a student visa without the stringent requirements to demonstrate that they do not plan to immigrate and apply for their green card before graduation.

While this bill failed to move when introduced in the 113th Congress, increasing visas for high-skilled workers tends to be favored by both Republicans and Democrats. The bipartisan group of sponsors suggests that this legislation may gain traction in the Senate. Additionally, Representative Bob Goodlatte (R-VA), who chairs the House Judiciary Committee, has indicated interest in considering immigration legislation that improves programs for high-skilled workers.

Sources and Additional Information:

FEDERAL AGENCY AND ADMINISTRATION UPDATES AND NEWS

President Delivers 2015 State of the Union Address

On January 20, President Obama delivered his 2015 State of the Union Address in which he assured the public that the “state of the union is strong.” Although many of his proposed initiatives will face strong opposition from Congress, the State of the Union provides a useful glimpse into the President’s priorities for the upcoming year.

Specifically, the President’s address focused heavily on jobs, the economy, and working families. President Obama noted his plans for tax reform and his new community college plan. The community college plan strives to emphasize his broader goal of making the American workforce more competitive through expanded access to higher education. Also, the President highlighted a new Precision Medicine Initiative. The objective of the initiative is to provide doctors with specialized capabilities to administer medical treatments targeted towards individual patients’ specific genes, environments, and lifestyles. The Address also overviewed U.S. international engagement and diplomacy.

This Address also serves to shed light on potential priorities that will appear in the President’s impending fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget request, which is expected to be released on February 2.

Sources and Additional Information:


- A more detailed overview of the President’s initiatives, also released on January 20, is available at http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/01/20/middle-class-economics-21st-century-helping-working-families-get-ahead.

AFRI Fellowship RFA Released by NIFA

The National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) released the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) Request for Applications (RFA) for its re-vamped fellowship
program, the fiscal year (FY) 2015 Food, Agriculture, Natural Resources, and Human Sciences Education and Literacy Initiative. The agency plans to devote $15 million to the program in the upcoming year. Changes for the FY 2015 competition include a new title for the program that will now support fellowships for undergraduates in addition to graduate students and postdoctoral fellows. The release of the RFAs for AFRI’s FY 2015 core programs have been significantly delayed this year, as they are generally released in late December/early January.

Sources and Additional Information:


USDA Celebrates International Year of Soils in 2015

In January, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) began its celebration of the “International Year of the Soils,” a year-long initiative launched by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) to highlight the importance of soil for ecosystem health and food security.

The USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) will coordinate the efforts in the U.S., which will include monthly themes and awareness activities.

Sources and Additional Information:


NIAID Holds Advisory Council Meeting

On January 26, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) held its first advisory council meeting of the year to discuss the institute’s research priorities and review recent legislative and budget updates. In his Director’s report, NIAID Director Tony Fauci indicated that the President’s fiscal year (FY) 2016 budget request is scheduled to be released on time, on Monday February 2.
Because FY 2015 funding levels were finalized by Congress in December, Dr. Fauci also announced NIAID’s FY 2015 financial management plan, which will be similar to its plan from last year. In FY 2015, NIAID estimates the institute will fund R01s in the 10th percentile for established investigators and in the 14th percentile for new investigators.

Sources and Additional Information:
