

Government Relations Update

by Fran Boyd

For a brief time, it appeared the debt limit negotiations might spawn a Farm Bill agreement. Instead, the government was shut down, and many issues just got kicked forward. With both the House and Senate having passed their own version of a Farm Bill, a conference committee was named and they have started the House-Senate conference process, which is designed to reach a compromise between the two houses of congress. Most farm-commodity issues are not in dispute, and the research and conservation issues the honey bee industry wanted are in a position to be included in the final House-Senate conference report.

The major area of disagreement is over the nutrition portion of the bill; primarily in the level of funding for the SNAP (or food stamp) program. The Senate passed budget cuts to the SNAP program by approximately \$4 billion over 10 years; whereas the House passed a bill that cuts that program by \$40 billion over the same period. As I update this on Veteran's Day, the sad irony is that many of the food stamp cuts proposed by the House will impact a significant number of veterans. Anything is possible, but this will likely become a part of the next debt limit debate, which will be held a few months from now.

While most beekeepers who use the current H2A guest worker program have been able to get employees this last year, the much needed overhaul that would revamp the program for all agriculture industry groups is tied up in immigration reform legislation. The consensus is that the proposal for guest workers would be a significant improvement over the status quo. At this time, the Senate has passed comprehensive immigration reform legislation that makes significant improvements to the existing guest worker program, which the ABF supports. The House has not yet passed immigration legislation. No one is seriously expecting an Immigration Bill to be passed by both

houses and sent to the President in the near future, given the current atmosphere in Washington, DC.

Talks continue on the Hours of Service requirement, which requires that all truck drivers take a 30 minute no-duty break after 8 hours of driving. The livestock industry is petitioning for a waiver, since parking cattle or pigs in the sun for half an hour is not acceptable. As of today, no one at the USDA is willing to declare that honey bees are livestock. This issue will grind forward, even as bees start to be shipped for the almond bloom. There is pressure to resolve this issue that is coming from the Farm Bureau and the almond industry, as well as livestock producers and honey bee organizations. Hopefully the appropriate congressional committees will exert some pressure to get this resolved.

There is significant agreement that some kind of habitat enhancement will eventually be a part of the USDA farm programs; there is language in both versions of the farm bill that encourage it. The shutdown of the government put a hiccup in the discussions, so as this is compiled there are no details to report. The intent is to create incentives for farmers to plant pollinator and wildlife habitat that match the incentives offered for commodities, especially on marginal farmland.

ABF members should contact their Senators and Congressmen to urge passage of the Farm Bill, particularly provisions contained in the House and Senate bills that are beneficial to bee producers. If you have a Congressman or Senator that is a member of the conference committee, it is especially important that you contact them. Further, talking about the Hours of Service issue currently before the Department of Transportation and the need for a viable guest worker program will help them understand the impact of these large issues on our small, but important, industry.

