

## WASHINGTON REPORT

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### **Administrative Relief for Federal Grant Recipients Due to COVID-19**

On March 19, 2020, the federal Office of Management and Budget (OMB) issued a memo (M-20-17) titled: “Administrative Relief for Recipients and Applicants of Federal Financial Assistance Directly Impacted by the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) due to Loss of Operations.”

The USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) is particularly concerned about institutions with faculty, staff, and students who depend on grant funding for their livelihood and are required to shelter in place. However, the OMB memo specifically states: *Awarding agencies may allow recipients to continue to charge salaries and benefits to currently active Federal awards consistent with the recipients' policy of paying salaries (under unexpected or extraordinary circumstances) from all funding sources, Federal and non-Federal (Appendix A, No. 6).*

OMB's March 19th memo bolsters NIFA's continued response to COVID-19 as it allows the agency to also provide flexibilities for recipient organizations affected by the loss of operational capacity. Appendix A of the memorandum details administrative relief actions and procedures Federal awarding agencies are authorized to take.

Questions regarding the applicability of the memorandum's administrative relief provisions should be directed to NIFA's Awards Management Division at [awards@usda.gov](mailto:awards@usda.gov). For more information, see [OMB's M-20-17](#).

### **EPA Approves Isoxaflutole Use on Soybeans**

On March 30, EPA announced the registration of the use of isoxaflutole on genetically engineered soybeans. “Safe and effective weed management is a constant challenge that farmers face,” said American Soybean Association President and soybean grower from Worthington, Minnesota, Bill Gordon. “EPA's registration of isoxaflutole will provide soybean growers with an important new tool to combat damaging weeds and help better control emerging herbicide-resistance issues.

Isoxaflutole is already registered by EPA for use on corn in 33 states. Like this existing use, the new registered use of isoxaflutole on genetically engineered soybeans is classified as a restricted-use pesticide, meaning that applicators must receive special training in order to use it. The training will emphasize ways applicators will protect ground and surface water and non-target plants.

The new use on genetically engineered soybeans would be limited to specific counties in 25 states. EPA is limiting use to these specific counties to protect endangered or threatened species from exposure. EPA is also including additional use restrictions, such as not allowing aerial and irrigation system applications.

The registration is limited to five years during which EPA will evaluate any potential weed resistance issues that may result. As part of the terms and conditions of the registration, the registrant must provide a herbicide-resistance management plan and submit annual reports to EPA.

More information, including the final registration decision, can be found on:

<https://www.regulations.gov/docket?D=EPA-HQ-OPP-2019-0398>

### **USDA Casts Vision for Scientific Initiatives Through 2025**

The Agriculture Department has published a “USDA Science Blueprint” to serve as its vision for and commitment to scientific research through 2025. It lays out five overarching themes for research, education, and economics, each with established objectives, strategies, and evidence-building measures. The five Program Themes include: 1) sustainable ag intensification, 2) ag-climate adaptation, 3) food and nutrition translation, 4) value-added innovations, and 5) ag science policy leadership.

The [USDA Science Blueprint](#) (PDF, 2.6 MB) includes the four REE mission area agencies — the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), the Economic Research Service (ERS), the National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) — along with the Office of the Chief Scientist (OCS) and the science arms of the U.S. Forest Service (FS), Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Food and Nutrition Service (FNS), and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

Some strategies listed under plant production, health and genetics within the sustainable ag intensification theme include:

- Tap into genetic diversity and use genomic technology to accelerate breeding progress, decrease susceptibility to climate variability, pests, diseases, and weeds, and increase yield potential.
- Use precision agriculture technologies, innovative input technologies and stand improvement to optimize resource use and reduce the gap between actual yield and yield potential.
- Improve surveillance, early detection, rapid response, and recovery for transboundary, vector-borne, emerging/reemerging, and costly endemic crop diseases, insects, and weeds through research, education, and extension.
- Identify key factors in producer behavior change and technology adoption models emphasizing the critical decisions and thresholds.

### **Bill Authorizing 600 New Agricultural Inspectors Signed into Law**

On March 4, “The Protecting America’s Food & Agriculture Act of 2019” was signed into law, which addresses the shortage of agricultural inspectors who protect the nation’s food supply and agriculture industry and ensure safe and secure trade of agricultural goods across borders. The act authorizes U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP) to hire additional inspectors, support staff and K-9 teams to fully staff America’s airports, seaports and land ports of entry.

The USDA and CBP work together to facilitate safe and secure importation of agricultural goods into the U.S. The program’s agricultural specialists and K-9 units conduct inspections of passengers, commercial vessels, trucks, aircraft and railcars at U.S. ports of entry to protect health and safety by preventing the entry of harmful goods and invasive species that may pose a threat to American food and agriculture. On a typical day (prior to COVID-19), inspectors process more than 1 million passengers and 78,000 truck, rail and sea containers carrying goods worth approximately \$7.2 billion.

The act authorizes the annual hiring of 240 agricultural specialists a year until the workforce shortage is filled and 200 agricultural technicians a year to carry out administrative and support functions. The act also authorizes the training and assignment of 20 new K-9 teams a year, which have proven valuable in detecting illicit fruits, vegetables and animal products that may have otherwise been missed in initial

inspections. Finally, it authorizes supplemental appropriations each year to pay for the activities of the agriculture specialists, technicians and K-9 teams.

### **Cooperative Extension System COVID-19 Resource Collection Grows**

A comprehensive collection of COVID-19 resources developed by the Cooperative Extension System is available at <https://virtual.extension.org/extension-responses-to-covid-19>. To date, 48 land-grant institutions have contributed to the collection with new items being added nearly every day. In addition to materials submitted by states, the site also includes a number of general resources that Extension professionals and others may find useful. Recently added were collections of materials related to farmworkers, food systems, and health insurance for farm families. Navigation of the site has been aided by the addition of labels indicating whether a particular link contains information regarding institutional policies and procedures related to COVID-19 or programmatic resources for engaging the public. Links to additional resources can be sent directly to [contact-us@extension.org](mailto:contact-us@extension.org).

### **The Unified Website for Biotechnology Regulation**

The USDA, FDA, and EPA launched a Unified Website for Biotechnology Regulation: <https://usbiotechnologyregulation.mrp.usda.gov/biotechnologygov/home/> The Website streamlines information about the three regulatory agencies charged with overseeing agriculture biotechnology products and is part of the President's Executive Order on Modernizing the Regulatory Framework for Agricultural Biotechnology Products.

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