



Top Stories

2/10/2015—The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) [forecast](#) that 2015 net farm income would be approximately \$74 billion, a decrease of almost 32 percent from the 2014 forecast of about \$108 billion. This is the lowest net income forecast since 2009.

2/3/2015—Congressman Steve King (R-Iowa) [reintroduced](#) his Protect Interstate Commerce Act regarding the interstate commerce of agricultural goods. The bill would prevent states from restricting the sale of agricultural products from other states, based on the method of production. Rep. King was unsuccessful in an effort to attach similar language to the 2014 Farm Bill. NCSL [issued a letter](#) in August 2013 opposing the language, given its likely preemption of state agriculture laws.

2/2/2015—President Barack Obama unveiled his budget request to fund the federal government for fiscal year (FY) 2016. Overall, the president's \$4 trillion budget requests \$23.6 billion for the USDA and \$29.9 billion for the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE). See NCSL's NRI Committee [budget overview](#) for specific program funding details.

1/27/2015—The Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management announced its draft Outer Continental Shelf oil and gas leasing plan for 2017-2022. The draft plan includes potential drilling sites in the Atlantic Ocean that have never before been open for gas or oil development. The draft also designated certain portions of seas around the Arctic as off-limits from consideration for future oil and gas leasing. See [NCSL's Info Alert](#) for more details.

1/15/2015—The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) [announced](#) payments to states for their share of revenues from federal forests for fiscal year 2014. The 2014 payments totaled \$50 million to 41 states, more than an 80 percent decrease from 2013. The dramatic decrease is due to the expiration of the Secure Rural Schools program that dedicates federal forest revenue for use in building and maintaining rural schools.

From the Administration



2/3/2015—The President's 2016 budget would [provide](#) \$109 million for the Food Safety Modernization Act (FSMA) implementation, about a third of which will go to states.

As FSMA approaches full implementation, Deputy Commissioner for Foods and Veterinary Medicine at the Food and Drug Administration FDA, Michael Taylor noted that the next step is determining what states will need to implement the new rules. This is instrumental in knowing how much funding is required for implementation, and how much is going to be supplied by the agency.

2/2/2015—The administration [announced](#) that, beginning in March, the fee to graze livestock on public lands will be raised from the \$1.35 per animal unit month that it was in 2014 to \$1.69 for 2015. The new fees will be effective March 1.

1/14/2015—President Obama [announced](#) a number of initiatives related to methane emissions from oil and gas production, including a new goal to reduce methane emissions by 40-45 percent by 2025. Additionally, the president announced that EPA will be working on new methane emission

regulations and a set of guidelines for other volatile organic compounds. Other agencies will take steps to reduce methane emissions as well, including plans from DOI to update standards to reduce wasteful venting, flaring and leaking from oil and gas development on public lands.

From the 114th Congress

2/9/2015—Chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee Fred Upton (R-Mich.) released a framework to guide comprehensive energy legislation he plans to work on this session. The [Architecture of Abundance](#) framework focuses on “modernizing infrastructure, a 21st century energy workforce, energy diplomacy, and efficiency.”



2/4/2015—The U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee and the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee held a rare [bicameral hearing](#) on the state and local impacts of EPA’s Waters of the U.S. proposed rule. Both the EPA administrator and the head of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) testified on the rule that would attempt to clarify which waters are protected under the Clean Water Act. During the hearing EPA testified that it will work with USACE to clarify federal jurisdiction over ditches and on better definitions for certain words in the proposed rule.

2/3/2015—Senators Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.) and Pat Toomey (R-Pa.) [introduced](#) a bill that would limit crop insurance subsidies to \$50,000, which would save an estimated \$2.2 billion over ten years. Similarly, the president’s FY 2016 budget [proposed](#) reforms to the crop insurance program that would save an estimated \$16 billion over the next ten years.

1/29/2015—According to the Congressional Budget Office, due to a fall in commodity prices, the [projections](#) for average annual payments to farmers has increased by about 50 percent from just a year ago. This \$4.8 billion in payments exceeds the previous cost forecast of the 2014 farm bill.

1/22/2015—Representative Thomas Massie (R-Ky.) [announced](#) that he and a bipartisan cohort of 46 members have introduced the Industrial Hemp Farming Act of 2015 (H.R. 525). The bill would remove hemp from the definition of marijuana under the Controlled Substances Act, making it federally legal to produce and cultivate hemp, as it already is in many states.

From the Department of Energy (DOE)

2/14/2015—The Advanced Research Projects Agency-Energy [issued](#) a funding opportunity worth up to \$125 million for transformational energy projects. The projects should demonstrate abilities to reduce imported energy, reduce energy-related emissions and improve energy efficiency.

2/11/2015—DOE Secretary Ernest Moniz [announced](#) the launch of the new Office of Technology Transitions (OTT) within the agency. OTT will work closely with the national labs to engage industry to commercialize technology based on scientific innovations.

2/11/2015—DOE [announced](#) more than 20 new partners have committed \$1.7 billion to improve energy efficiency across their building portfolios, totaling 70 million square feet, as part of the agency’s Better Buildings Challenge. The partners, ranging from fast food companies to multifamily housing complexes, will work with DOE to share successful efficiency strategies.

2/4/2015—DOE [announced](#) they are ending federal support for the carbon capture and storage project in Illinois, known as FutureGen. The project will not be able to meet a deadline to use \$1 billion in stimulus funding and was unable to secure enough private financing to continue.

2/2/2015—DOE sent the draft [Quadrennial Energy Review](#) (QER) to the White House for review. The QER is a compilation of data gathered over four years that is aimed at outlining energy challenges in the U.S.



2/1/2015—DOE [released](#) a report on the natural gas infrastructure of the country and its ability to respond to increased demands. The report found that interstate natural gas pipeline infrastructure will only need to add a small amount of new pipelines to be able to handle the expected growth.

From the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

2/10/2015—USDA [designated](#) 256 counties across the US as disaster areas due to current drought conditions. Farmers and ranchers within these disaster areas are eligible for low-interest emergency loans, as well as a variety of other safety-net programs, under the [2014 Farm Bill](#).



2/9/2015—Secretary Vilsack [announced](#) the availability of \$30 million in funding for 22 projects that aim to assist citrus producers in fighting *Huanglongbing* (HLB). Also known as citrus greening, this disease poses a strong threat to citrus production in the U.S.

1/21/2015—USDA [released](#) a set of new federal standards regarding pathogens in poultry, with the goal of reducing illness due to *Salmonella* and *Campylobacter* bacteria. The department is aiming to improve testing patterns, and setting bacteria standards that are harder to meet. The levels set in 1996 for whole chickens do not account for the increases in bacteria exposure as a result of processing poultry into separate cuts or ground meat.

1/14/2015—USDA [reported](#) that the new Regional Conservation Partnership Program will provide over \$370 million in funding for 115 conservation projects across 50 states and Puerto Rico. Along with partner contributions, total funding for the projects is estimated to reach almost \$800 million. The conservation projects have goals such as protecting wildlife

habitat, improving water quality, and enhancing the overall quality of our environment.

1/12/2015—USDA Secretary Vilsack [reported](#) that over half of US dairy farmers have signed up for the voluntary Margin Protection Program, a safety-net program created under the [2014 Farm Bill](#). The program provides financial assistance to dairy farmers when their margins between feed costs and the price of milk drop below selected levels.

1/12/2015—USDA Deputy Secretary Krysta Harden [announced](#) that more than \$18 million in funding is being made available to educate the next generation of farmers and ranchers. USDA's National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA) has administered The Beginning Farmer and Rancher Developments Program (BFRDP), with the goal of mentoring and enhancing sustainability in the next generation of farmers and ranchers.

1/8/2015—USDA meteorologist Brad Rippey [announced](#) that drought levels in the US have dropped from 29.13 to 28.10 percent in the past five weeks and they are now at the lowest level in three years. This reduction occurred in response to recent storms and rainfall, although much of the western US is still suffering from significant dryness, with 78 percent of California classified as being in either extreme or exceptional drought.

12/31/2014—FDA [announced](#) a new grant program aimed at assisting small and medium-sized farms to become compliant under FSMA. The grant gives priority to applicants that plan on training the owners/operators of small or disadvantaged farms/food-processing facilities in food safety regulations.

From the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

2/6/2015—EPA along with USACE [published](#) a Notice of Withdrawal in the federal register for the agricultural exemption interpretative rule that was released in conjunction with the Waters of the U.S. proposed rule. The rule was originally intended to clarify permitting exemptions for the agricultural

industry under the Clean Water Act, but gathered pushback from the agriculture stakeholders. The FY 2015 budget signed into law in December included a provision requiring the withdrawal.

1/15/2015—EPA [released](#) the final scientific report on the connectivity of streams and wetlands to downstream waters. The report summarizes current understanding on how interconnected streams and wetlands affect the physical, chemical and biological composition of downstream waters. EPA Administrator McCarthy has stated the report is vital to finalization of the agencies proposed rule on which waters in the United States are protected under the Clean Water Act.

Additional Resources and Reports of Interest

2/12/2015—The American Gas Association released its [2015 Playbook](#), highlighting natural gas information such as consumer costs and carbon dioxide emissions data. The playbook showed that natural gas customers saved an average of \$693 per year from 2012 to 2013 and reduced emissions by half a million metric tons.

2/10/2015—The International Energy Agency (IEA) released its [medium-term energy outlook](#) which predicts that oil prices will stabilize, at low levels, and momentum will return to the U.S. shale market, over the course of the next few years. IEA also predicts that oil production could shrink by 560,000 barrels per day by the end of the decade.

2/2/2015—The Bureau of Land Management [approved](#) the environmental assessment plan for the infrastructure for a proposed \$5 billion wind energy project in Wyoming. There is still a second environmental assessment that needs to be signed off on before the project can move forward. The project, if completed, would be the largest wind farm in North America.

1/28/2015—The U.S. District Judge for the District of Minnesota [ruled](#) in favor of EPA in a lawsuit filed by the American Farm Bureau Federation and the National Pork Producers Council. The farm groups sued EPA over the agency's release of

documents related to concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs), to environmental groups who requested the information under the Freedom of Information Act. The judge felt the farm groups lacked standing because the release of information did not cause "actual or imminent injury" to the farm operators.

1/24/2015—The U.S. Department of Interior [approved](#) a \$2 billion transmission line intended to carry future power from solar and wind projects. The SunZia Southwest Transmission Project still must obtain state and local permits and rights-of-way from landowners as well as secure financing before construction can begin. The company states the 515-mile line will be operational by 2018.

1/21/2015—The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [released](#) \$302 million in Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) block grants. So far HHS has released \$3.357 billion of the \$3.390 billion appropriated to the program for fiscal year 2015.

NCSL Resources

NCSL is already underway planning its 2015 Legislative Summit taking place Aug. 3-5 in Seattle, Wash. See [our website](#) for more details and resources from last year.

[Click here](#) to find resources from past meetings including session presentations, information, videos and more!

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