



## Top Stories

**4/2/2015**—The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sent [letters](#) to makers of the neonicotinoid pesticides that are used in outdoor settings informing them that the agency is not likely to approve new uses for the product until the administration releases a forthcoming report on pollinator health, in which all federal agencies will outline actions to reverse the decline in bee populations. On the same day, EPA [approved](#) the herbicide Enlist Duo for use in six states—Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Ohio, South Dakota and Wisconsin.

**3/24/2015**—Senators Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska), Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.), Lamar Alexander (R-Tenn.) and Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) introduced legislation directing the federal government to establish both temporary and permanent storage sites for nuclear weapon and energy production waste. On the same day, the White House unveiled its own [strategy](#) for disposing of defense and commercial nuclear waste. The strategy, authorized in a [presidential memo](#), reverses the government's past policy of combining nuclear waste produced from defense activities with spent nuclear reactor fuel into the same repository. For more information see [NCSL's blog](#).

**3/24/2015**—U.S. Representatives Mike Pompeo (R-Kan.) and G.K. Butterfield (D-N.C.) introduced The Safe and Accurate Food Labeling Bill, [legislation](#) that would prevent states from being able to label products that were made with genetically modified organisms (GMO). The bill would put the responsibility of labeling food and beverage products made with GMOs solely in the hands of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

**3/24/2015**—The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued its proposed rule to limit farm payments to nonfarmers, consistent with requirements Congress mandated in the 2014

Farm Bill. The [proposed rule](#) would limit farm payments to individuals who may be designated as farm managers but are not actively engaged in farm management. Congress gave USDA the authority to address this issue for joint ventures and general partnerships, although it expressly exempted family farm operations from being affected by the USDA rule. Currently, an “actively engaged farmer” is considered overly broad by allowing people with little to no contributions to critical farm management decisions to receive safety-net payments if they are classified as farm managers while also allowing an unlimited number of managers to receive payments in certain situations.

**3/20/2015**—The Department of Interior (DOI) [released](#) a final rule regulating hydraulic fracturing on public lands. The rule states that oil and gas companies employing hydraulic fracturing processes on public lands will be required to disclose the chemicals they use and to halt wastewater storage techniques that could contaminate groundwater. Hours after the release of the rule, a coalition of Western energy groups filed a lawsuit against DOI stating the rules are redundant to state regulations already underway.

## From the Administration

**3/31/2015**—The White House [submitted](#) its domestic climate strategy to the United Nations (U.N.). The strategy formalizes targets and plans announced by the administration throughout the past year. One such announcement central to the U.N. plan is the 26-28 percent reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from the power sector by 2025. The U.S. plan and the plans promised by almost 200 other nations will form the foundation for an international climate deal, to be proposed by the U.N.

**3/28/2015**—The administration released a [National Strategy for Combating Antibiotic Resistant Bacteria](#), which identifies “critical actions” the federal government will implement to reduce the rise of antibiotic resistant bacteria. The strategy would not impose any new requirements on antibiotic use in agriculture outside of the voluntary measures put into place by the FDA last year. The report cited the need for more robust data on antibiotic use in the agriculture industry. This National Strategy follows the [Executive Order – Combating Antibiotic-Resistant Bacteria](#), which the president issued last September, and the President’s Council of Advisors on Science and Technology [Report to the President on Combating Antibiotic Resistance](#).

**3/15/2015**—The Presidential Task Force on Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing and Seafood Fraud released its [action plan](#) that will guide implementation of recommendations made by the Task Force in 2014. Key actions include expanding efforts to detect black market fishing, strengthening enforcement and developing a traceability program to track seafood from harvest to commerce.

## From the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress

**3/30/2014**—A group of 12 senators, led by Senator Roy Blunt (R-Mo.), sent a [letter](#) to the EPA urging the agency to avoid implementing restrictions on neonicotinoid pesticides without going through a science-based regulatory process as well as further information regarding a study released in October 2014, which found that neonicotinoid seed treatments provided little benefit.

**3/27/2015**—The Senate passed the [Energy Efficiency Improvement Act](#) (S.535) sponsored by Senators Rob Portman (R-Ohio) and Jeanne Shaheen (D-N.H.). The bill would create a voluntary process for commercial building owners to reduce energy consumption, exempt certain electric resistance water heaters used for emergency response from DOE regulations, and require federal agencies to develop an implementation strategy for energy efficient information technologies.

**3/25/2015**—Senator Maria Cantwell (D-Wash.) [introduced](#) the Crude-By-Rail Safety Act, a bill that would attempt to make shipping crude oil by rail safer by requiring the Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration (PHMSA) to draft new regulations. Specifically, the bill would require PHMSA to set new standards for crude volatility, immediately remove unsafe tanks cars from commission, and increase fines for violations, amongst other changes. The bill is co-sponsored by Senators Diane Feinstein (D-Calif.), Patty Murray (D-Wash.) and Tammy Baldwin (D-Wisc.).

**3/4/2015**—The Senate did not garner the [necessary votes](#) to override President Obama’s veto of a bill that would approve construction of the Keystone XL pipeline. Under Senate rules, three-fourths majority is needed to override a presidential veto; the vote was 62-37.



**3/2/2015**—Senators Dianne Feinstein (D-Calif.) and Susan Collins (R-Maine) [introduced](#) legislation aimed at preventing the overuse of antibiotics in agriculture. The [bill](#), titled the Prevention of Antibiotic Resistance Act, would require that antibiotics used for human medical purposes not be used in agriculture, unless the producer of that antibiotic can prove that its use does not pose any human health risk. The bill is cosponsored by Senators Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) and Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.).

## From the Department of Energy (DOE)

**3/27/2015**—DOE Investigators [determined](#) the cause of a radiation alarm activation and the indefinite shutdown at the Waste Isolation Pilot Project (WIPP) in New Mexico last year. The investigators found that a chemical reaction between an absorptive agent meant to neutralize the radioactive nitrate waste resulted in a small explosion inside the barrel where the waste was kept. This caused the radioactive alarms to switch on at the plant and months of investigation into possible radioactive leaks. DOE’s WIPP facility is a deep geological repository for permanent disposal of defense nuclear waste.

**3/24/2015**—DOE [extended](#) a partnership with DOI and the U.S. Department of Army for Civil Works to advance hydropower development for an additional five years. The original agreement was signed in 2010. The renewal agreement adds on a second phase of collaboration to improve the accuracy and reduce costs of water flow measurement technology; evaluate new superconducting generator technology to reduce the size and weight of generators; and further develop low-impact, low-cost technologies.

**3/18/2015**—DOE [awarded](#) nearly \$6 million to 11 tribes to implement renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies on tribal lands. The tribal lands awarded funding span 8 states.

**3/12/2015**—DOE [released](#) a new report on the viability of wind power in the U.S., finding that the source of energy could supply the nation with 35 percent of its electric generation by 2050. Currently wind power generates 4.5 percent of the nation's electricity. In order to reach the 35 percent level the report estimates that the industry would need to see a cost reductions of 37 percent by 2050.

## From the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA)

**3/10/2015**—USDA Secretary Tom Vilsack [announced](#) that more than \$66.5 million will be made available for research and extension programs to help specialty and organic crop growers address production issues. The grants will be funded by the [Specialty Crop Research Initiative](#) and the [Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative](#)

**3/5/2015**—FDA [reported](#) that more than 99 percent of milk samples taken during its five-year [survey](#) did not contain any drug residues of concern. The survey results support the efficacy of the U.S. milk safety system in preventing drug residues in milk, even in the rare cases when drugs need to be administered for cattle health.

**2/19/2015**—USDA Chief Economist Robert Johansson said he [expects](#) rail transport in the Upper Midwest region to return to normal levels this year. Rail transportation costs reached a historical high in 2014 as a result of railway congestion because of maintenance, cold temperatures and increased traffic bringing oil from the Bakken Shale area.

## From the Department of Interior (DOI)

**3/31/2015**—DOI [published](#) a "[record of decision](#)" reaffirming a 2008 lease sale to Shell Oil Company in Alaska's Chukchi Sea that has been held up in the courts. The move follows last month's release of a final environmental review of the contested lease sale. This record of decision is not final approval for Shell to resume drilling but is a step forward.

**3/18/2015**—DOI's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management [drew](#) more than \$580 million in bids for an oil and gas lease sale in the Central Gulf of Mexico. A total of 42 energy companies submitted bids on tracts covering 924,000 acres.



**2/24/2015**—DOI [proposed](#) rules and safety standards for exploratory drilling operations in the Arctic Outer Continental Shelf.

The proposed requirements included ensuring adequate pre-operation planning, enhancing operational safety and environmental quality during exploration, and augmenting oil spill response planning.

## Additional Resources and Reports of Interest

**4/1/2015**—Speaking at a power association conference, the head of the North American Electric Reliability Corp (NERC) [said](#) the EPA's proposed regulations to reduce greenhouse gas

emissions from the power sector are likely to create electric generation shortages in various regions of the U.S. NERC plans to release a report in mid-April with official findings of generation capacity that will need to be retired if the rules are finalized, and where this could create shortages.

**3/31/2015**—Washington State University in partnership with the American Gas Association [published](#) a study finding that emissions from local natural gas distribution systems have decreased over the past 20 years anywhere from 36 to 70 percent from current estimates in certain places.

**3/31/2015**—The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) held its third and final [regional conference](#) in Washington, D.C., to explore potential reliability issues with EPA's proposed greenhouse gas emission reduction rules. The all-day conference hosted a number of panels consisting of the EPA, state regulators, utilities, co-ops, grid operators and environmental groups.

**3/30/2015**—BNSF Railways [announced](#) it is taking additional safety measures for trains shipping crude oil, such as slowing trains to 35 mph in cities with more than 100,000 people and increasing track inspections near waterways. A BNSF spokesman said the increased safety measures are in response to recent derailments, including one involving a BNSF train in Illinois last month.

**3/26/2015**—A group of 19 attorneys general (AG) wrote a letter to EPA calling for the agency to withdraw its proposed rule regulating greenhouse gas emissions from existing power plants. The AGs contend that because EPA announced in January it would delay the release of a final rule for new power plants to coincide with the final rule for existing power plants, both rules should be withdrawn. An EPA spokesperson responded to the letter stating it is "incorrect that the consequence of missing a deadline for finalizing a proposed rule is that EPA must withdraw the proposal."

**3/16/2015**—In a [speech](#) before the National Farmers Union, EPA Administrator Gina McCarthy announced she is renaming the Waters of the U.S. proposed rule that would define which water bodies should be permitted under the Clean Water Act.

The agency will now call the proposal the "Clean Water Rule." McCarthy also stated that the final rule would be released this spring. On April 3, the EPA sent the rule to the Office of Management and Budget for final review.

**3/12/2015**—The Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) [published](#) a notice that it will finish a supplemental Environmental Impact Study on Yucca Mountain as a repository for nuclear waste within 12 to 15 months with a draft ready later this summer. NRC will take public comment on the draft after it is released.

**2/25/2015**—The Energy Information Administration released data showing that [crude oil storage](#) in the United States is at an 80-year high.

## NCSL Resources

NCSL's NRI Committee has launched its [2015 Spring Webinar Series](#). Beginning April 30, the committee will host a webinar almost every Friday through June (for exclusions – [check website](#) for specific dates). Topics include: EPA regulations, general aviation, falling oil prices, invasive species, food safety and more. [Register online for free!](#)



[Registration](#) is open for NCSL's 2015 Legislative Summit taking place Aug. 3-5 in Seattle, Wash. See [the website](#) for more details and resources from last year. [Click here](#) to find resources from past meetings including session presentations, information, videos and more!