Egypt FMD outbreak threatens region

Urgent action is required to control a major outbreak of foot and mouth disease (FMD) in Egypt and prevent its spread throughout North Africa and the Middle East, the U.N. Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) said on Monday.  FAO said in a document that 15,176 cases of FMD are suspected in the Lower Nile Delta region, according to official estimates, and 4,658 animals — mostly calves — have died already.  FAO explained that although a case of FMD has circulated in Egypt for some years, this is an entirely new introduction of a virus strain known as SAT2; livestock have no immune protection against this strain and vaccines currently available in Egypt are not effective against the strain. “We are working closely to support the government to bring the outbreak under control. The area around the Lower Nile Delta appears to be severely affected, while other areas in Upper Egypt and the West appear less so,” FAO chief veterinary officer Juan Lubroth said, adding that a Libya FMD outbreak action to prevent the disease from spreading further. FMD is not a direct threat to people.

Ramaswamy to be named NIFA director

President Barack Obama plans to appoint Sonny Ramaswamy as director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s National Institute of Food & Agriculture (NIFA). NIFA links USDA with the land-grant university system to advance research, extension, and higher education in the food and agricultural sciences and related environmental, social and human sciences. Ramaswamy is currently the College of Agriculture Sciences at Oregon State University and also serves as director of the Oregon Agricultural Research Foundation. Previously, he was associate dean of Purdue University’s College of Agriculture and directed its agricultural research programs from 2006 to 2009. Ramaswamy also has his bachelor’s and master’s degrees in agronomy from the University of Kansas, and earned his doctorate in entomology from Rutgers University in New Jersey.

LeMar doubles plant capacity

Grain handling system manufacturer LeMar Industries of Des Moines, Iowa, recently announced its second significant expansion of 2012, doubling the capacity of its Hall Industries fabrication facility fewer than two months after acquiring Indiana-based Riley Equipment. LeMar, which produces steel products for a variety of industries, was founded in 1955 and has a large R&D capability to custom design and fabricate equipment to customer needs in addition to its standard product lines. Its customers include farmers, ethanol plants, co-op electric cooperatives, bioenergy plants, tobacco manufacturers, and the military. In January 2009, the company announced a significant expansion of its Hall Industries steel fabrication facility in Sheffield, Iowa. Adding 48,000 sq. ft., the company will more than double production capacity at this project this month. LeMar said the plan, which will have a total of 8,000 sq. ft., features a state-of-the-art powder coat facility, laser processing, plate rolling and robotic welding.

Ag should engage media in ‘right way’

The agriculture industry is often critical of how the media covers agriculture news, claiming that it is largely mis-represented and/or unbalanced. However, Dr. Frank Mitloehner, assistant professor at the University of California-Davis, explained to those attending the recent American Feed Industry Assn. Purchasing & Ingredient Suppliers Conference that the media is usually a matter of the media not being properly informed, not necessarily done intentionally. For some reason, agriculture in general does not work well with and engage the media in the right way, Mitloehner said. Then, when it does work, it relies on language and concepts the media can’t relate to or, worst of all, it gets confrontational, he said. “We can no longer sit back and say, ‘We know what’s right when it comes to food production, so stay out of our business.’ We have to engage the media. We have to have the conversation in the right way,” said Mitloehner, who pro- vided multiple examples from his area of expertise in which the same remover came back and wrote a completely differ- ent article once the science and the facts were present- ed. Mitloehner is represent- ing the U.S. feed industry in an international effort to track greenhouse gas lev- els associated with feedstuffs used in the livestock supply chain. That work started in Europe in late March.

Animal rights

Missouri state representative Ward Franzen has introduced bill H.B. 1535 that would prevent future ballot initiatives or legis- lation from granting rights to animals similar to those for people. Specifically, the bill states that Missouri laws “shall not grant to any ani- mal a right, privilege or legal status that is equivalent (to) or creates a right, privilege or legal status” that the state grants to humans. Franzen said that the bill “shall not be construed as limiting laws that protect the welfare of animals.” Franzen said he is taking a proactive stance to protect Missouri’s natural resources: agriculture.

Inside Washington

FarmERS! Farm bill debate took a turn for the worse last week when House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R, Wis.) announced that he wants to make major cuts to farm programs to meet deficit reduction goals. His proposed cuts to food stamp programs are even more likely to jeopardize passage of the farm bill this year. In reality, 82% of farm bill funding goes not, as you might imagine, to support agriculture but, rather, to U.S. Department of Agriculture nutrition programs, according to recent congressional testimony.

Despite the bona fide need for budget savings, major cuts to food stamps could kill the death of the farm bill in an election year. Here’s why: Food stamps go to every single household in the country, and 435 of them. Even urban and suburban lawmakers who know nothing about corn production — and don’t particularly care to — know about food stamps.

Attaching food stamps, school lunch programs and the Women, Infants & Children program to the farm bill gives non-farm district lawmakers a reason to support it. In the past, those votes have been key to garnering support for spending not only on nutrition programs but also the full range of programs tied to farm production agriculture. With all 435 House seats up for election this fall, how many House Democrats think they want to go on record voting for a farm bill that cuts food stamps?

It’s now fairly clear that if a farm bill debate takes place at all this year, it will be within a few months of the November election. Even a debate on the subject has hazards for farm program supporters.

Food stamps a tricky topic

With SALLY SCHUFF

Farmers have enough trouble explaining why the federal government should fund its programs without having to explain now why food stamp recipients should do without so the money can fund agricultural programs. It’s going to be a very tricky conversation.

Hand it to Ryan to have courage on the food stamp issue. He addressed it head-on in his budget. Total spending for the food stamp program has more than doubled since 2001, according to Ryan’s budget report. In addition, the program got a major funding transfusion in 2009 from the economic stimulus bill, but those funds came with a catch. States were told that if they had nothing but if they received higher ESL rates. Unsurprisingly, food stamp use has risen 46% since January 2009. “Much of this is due to the recession, but not all of it,” Ryan noted in his document report. For instance, it cited a USDA study showing that food stamp enrollments rose between 2003 and 2007 even as unemployment in those years went down. The Ryan plan does not attach food stamp programs to the farm bill, and the Food and Nutrition Service recently announced that the10-year budget cost projection is “almost $770 billion” below the Senate’s 2007 estimate of less than $840 billion.

The program cannot continue to grow at its current rate,” the budget report concluded.