



The Blueberry Hill Climb

March 24-26, 2025

Briefing Binder

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Schedule Overview

Monday, March 24

5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m.

Hill Climb Welcome Reception

Tuesday, March 25

8:00 a.m. – 9:00 a.m.

Breakfast Session

NABC Government Affairs Team Roundtable

9 a.m. – 11:45 a.m.

Education Sessions

Panel: Why Famers Need to Pay Attention to the Tax Debate

Takeaways on Trump's Tariff Actions

Shaping a Transformative Farm Bill for Specialty Crops

A Comprehensive Review of Agriculture Labor Policy

11:45 a.m. – 12:30 p.m.

Lunch & Learn

Lori Chavez-DeRemer, U.S. Secretary of Labor

2:00 p.m. – 5:00 p.m.

USDA Meetings

6:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Cocktail Reception

7:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m.

Inspiring Possibilities Dinner

Tate Bennett, America First Policy Institute

Wednesday, March 26

7:30 a.m. – 8:45 a.m.

Blueberry Pinnacle Award Breakfast

Representative Kat Cammack (R-FL-03)

10:30 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.

Hill Meetings

5:30 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.

Red, White, and Blueberry Reception



Keynote Speakers

Location: AKA Hotel Ballroom XL

Lunch & Learn with U.S. Secretary of Labor (March 25)

Secretary Lori Chavez-DeRemer

Lori Chavez-DeRemer was sworn in on March 11, 2025, as the 30th Secretary of the United States Department of Labor. Chavez-DeRemer has dedicated over two decades of her life to public service, beginning in 2002 on the Happy Valley Parks Committee in Oregon. She later served on the Happy Valley City Council, became council president, and was then elected to two terms as the city's first Latina mayor. Under her leadership, Happy Valley became Oregon's fastest-growing community due to initiatives that strengthened working families and small businesses.

In 2022, Chavez-DeRemer was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives by Oregon's 5th Congressional District, making history as the first Republican woman and one of the first Latinas elected to Congress from the state. She served on the House committees on Agriculture; Education and the Workforce; and Transportation and Infrastructure, championing commonsense solutions and securing critical investments for her constituents.

Chavez-DeRemer is a successful small businesswoman and the first in her family to graduate from college, earning a business administration degree. A proud wife and mother of twin daughters, Chavez-DeRemer is passionate about advocating for businesses, workers, and families across the country.

Inspiring Possibilities Dinner (March 25)

Tate Bennett: Senior Adviser on Policy Matters, America First Policy Institute

Ms. Bennett has become a mainstay in U.S. agriculture policy, currently serving as a Senior Adviser on policy matters at the America First Policy Institute. She previously served as Special Assistant to the President on Agriculture, Trade, and Food Assistance at the National Economic Council under Director Larry Kudlow during the first Trump Administration. She also served at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in senior roles during the first Trump Administration, including as the Agriculture Adviser to the Administrator and the Associate Administrator for the Office of Public Engagement and



Environmental Education. Bennett has extensive legislative experience, having worked in both the U.S. House and Senate for various Members of Congress, where she negotiated provisions in the 2014 Farm Bill.

Blueberry Pinnacle Award Breakfast (March 26)

Representative Kat Cammack (R-FL-03)

Representative Kat Cammack who represents Florida's Third Congressional District, which covers 12 counties in North Central Florida. She grew up on a cattle ranch outside of Denver and was active in 4-H and rodeo. Representative Cammack is in her second term and serves on the House Agriculture and House Energy and Commerce Committees where she brings attention to the challenges faced by working-class families and Florida's farmers, ranchers, and producers with rising inflation, labor challenges, and supply-chain issues. And she recently reintroduced the bipartisan Fair Access to Agriculture Disaster Programs Act aimed at removing barriers to agriculture disaster assistance for producers.

Representative Cammack is this year's recipient of the Blueberry Pinnacle Award for her unwavering support for American agriculture and her dedication to ensuring the long-term success of U.S. blueberry growers.

The Blueberry Pinnacle Award is presented each year during the Blueberry Hill Climb to a distinguished member of Congress who has demonstrated outstanding leadership in advancing policies that enhance the competitiveness of U.S. blueberry growers. The honoree is selected by the NABC Government Affairs Committee. The inaugural award was presented to former Senator Debbie Stabenow of Michigan in 2024.



Education Sessions (March 25)

Location: AKA Hotel Ballroom XL

Can Farmers Win the “Super Bowl of Tax Debates”?

Brandon Audap, *Principal, Monument Advocacy*

Joey Connor, *Vice President of Tax Policy, American Bankers Association*

With the 2017 tax cuts set to expire unless Congress acts, the stakes are high for the agricultural industry. Now that the Continuing Resolution is off the agenda, lawmakers are shifting their focus to tax legislation—what will make the cut? This panel will provide a deep dive into the current state of the tax debate, what agriculture stands to gain or lose, and how potential policy changes could impact the blueberry industry. Join industry experts as they break down the key issues, legislative outlook, and strategies for ensuring agriculture’s voice is heard in this critical discussion.

Takeaways on Trump’s Tariff Actions (*Virtual*)

Brian Kuehl, *Principal, Pinion*

Tariffs are a defining aspect of U.S. trade policy under the Trump administration, with significant implications for agriculture and the broader economy. In this session, Brian Kuehl, Director at Pinion, will break down the key takeaways from recent tariff actions, their impact on trade relationships, and what they mean for farmers and agribusinesses. Attendees will gain insights into the shifting trade landscape and the potential opportunities and challenges ahead.

Shaping a Transformational Farm Bill for Specialty Crops (*Virtual*)

Jonathan Cordone, *Principal and Founder, Cordone Consulting and Consultant for the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance*

With two extensions behind us, what are the chances of passing a Farm Bill in 2025? This session will break down the political and budgetary factors at play, including the impact of budget reconciliation on the bill’s prospects. Jonathan Cordone, consultant for the Specialty Crop Farm Bill Alliance (SCFBA), will provide insights into the legislative



landscape and the fight to secure continued and expanded support for specialty crop producers. Representing a coalition of over 200 organizations, SCFBA is at the forefront of advocating for policies that strengthen the produce industry. Learn what's ahead and how specialty crops can shape the next Farm Bill.

A Comprehensive Review of Agriculture Labor Policy

Lynn Jacquez, Partner, JPH Law and Counsel for the Agriculture Labor Policy Group

Agricultural labor policy is at a critical crossroads, with new legislative efforts, agency leadership, and political dynamics shaping the future of the workforce that sustains America's farms. This session will provide an in-depth analysis of the current state of agricultural labor policy, key legislative proposals, and the strategic opportunities available under the new administration and an Ag-friendly Department of Labor (DOL) secretary.

Key discussion points include:

- The latest developments in agricultural labor policy and workforce challenges.
- An overview of recent bills and their potential impact on farm labor.
- Targeted solutions to address long-standing workforce issues.
- USDA & DOL Collaboration: Will these agencies finally align to fix the Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR)?
- Border Security & Labor Reform: With former President Trump asserting that the border is secure, is now the moment to tackle ag labor reform?

This session will equip you with the knowledge to navigate the evolving agricultural labor landscape and advocate for practical reforms that support both farmers and workers. You will leave prepared with key insights and talking points for their meetings on the Hill.



USDA Meetings (March 25)

Location: USDA South Building

Mission Area: Farm Programs and Conservation (FPAC)

Andrew Fisher, Chief of Staff

About Andrew: Prior to joining USDA, Andrew served as a Legislative Assistant to Senator Mitch McConnell (R-KY) from September 2022 to February 2025. Prior to that, he was the Congressional Relations Manager for the Pork Producer's Council. He held positions in the offices of Senator Roy Blunt (R-MO), Rep. Kristi Noem (R-SD), and Rep. Sam Graves (R-MO).

About FPAC: USDA created the Farm Production and Conservation (FPAC) mission area in 2017, bringing together the three agencies—Farm Service Agency (FSA), Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), Risk Management Agency (RMA) – that work directly with farmers throughout the country to deliver important USDA programs and services.

Discussion Topics:

- Disaster Relief
- Marketing Assistance for Specialty Crops (MASC)
- Tree Assistance Program
- Crop Insurance

Mission Area: Research, Education, and Economics (REE)

Ricki Schroeder, Chief of Staff

About Ricki: Prior to joining USDA, Ricki served as a professional staff member for the House Agriculture Committee Republicans where he worked extensively on specialty crop policy issues. Prior to this, he worked in the Office of the Vice-President, Dean, and Director of Agricultural Programs at Oklahoma State University. He earned a Bachelor of Science degree in agricultural sciences and natural resources from Oklahoma State University in 2017.

About REE: REE mission area of the U. S. Department of Agriculture has Federal leadership responsibility for advancing scientific knowledge related to agriculture. REE includes four



scientific agencies – the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), Economic Research Service (ERS), National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS), and the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) - and the Office of the Chief Scientist.

Discussion Topics:

- NASS Farm Labor Survey
- USDA-ARS Blueberry Breeding Program and implications of staffing cuts
- Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) and the status of funding for previously awarded projects

Mission Area: Trade and Foreign Agricultural Affairs (TFAA)

Riley Pagett, Chief of Staff

About Riley: Prior to becoming the Chief of Staff for the TFAA Mission Area at USDA, Riley was the Legislative Director and Counsel for Representative Tracey Mann (R-KS). He previously served as Chief of Staff for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Partnerships and Public Engagement and as Director of Advocacy and Government Relations for the National FFA Organization. He also worked as a legislative staff member for Senator James Lankford and as a clerk and legislative assistant for the House Agriculture Committee.

About TFAA: TFAA is the lead U.S. agency tasked with promoting exports of U.S. agricultural products through market intelligence, trade policy, trade capacity building, and trade promotion programs.

Discussion Topics:

- Market Access Program
- Technical Assistance of Specialty Crops Program
- Trade Mission plans

Mission Area: Marketing and Regulatory Programs (MRP)

Jordan Bonfitto, Chief of Staff

About Jordan: Prior to joining USDA as Chief of Staff for MRP, Jordan served as the Director of Government Affairs for the National Thoroughbred Racing Association where he led the



organization's advocacy efforts. He was also a public servant during the previous Trump administration as director of external and intergovernmental affairs at USDA for U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue as well as an Agriculture policy advisor for the National Economic Council at the White House. Prior to the Administration, Jordan worked on Capitol Hill.

About MRP: MRP facilitates domestic and international marketing of U.S. agricultural products, protects U.S. plant and animal health, regulates genetically engineered organisms, administers the Animal Welfare Act, and carries out wildlife damage management activities. MRP agencies include the Agriculture Marketing Service (AMS) and the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS).

Discussion Topics:

- AMS Data Reporting
- Commodity Procurement
- Export Market Access (SPS)



Issues Briefs & Talking Points

Topline: U.S. blueberry producers are experiencing declining profitability due to rapidly escalating costs that put them at a competitive disadvantage. Congress should support policies and programs that keep the domestic producer sustainable and profitable.

- The U.S. blueberry industry contributes \$6.7 billion in annual economic impact, translating to more than \$18.3 million flowing into the U.S. economy and local communities every day.
- U.S. blueberry growers alone create and sustain more than 49,260 full-time equivalent jobs each year.
- Nearly \$2.4 billion in labor income is generated by the business activities of growers – equating to more than \$6.7 million each day.

Farm Bill

The 2018 Farm Bill has been extended twice and is now set to expire on September 30, 2025. In 2024, the House Agriculture Committee approved its version of the Farm Bill, but it never reached the floor for a vote. Former Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Debbie Stabenow introduced her version in December 2024. However, with time running out and political capital dwindling, Congress ultimately failed to pass a new Farm Bill, opting instead to delay the deadline until September 2025. The bill's overall cost remains a key sticking point and a significant hurdle that lawmakers must address to finally secure its passage.

NABC's Top Farm Bill Priorities

- Modernize the Tree Assistance Program (TAP) to meet the needs of today's blueberry growers.
- Provide new investments in mechanization and automation research to promote on-farm efficiencies and help address labor supply challenges.
- Improve crop insurance products for specialty crop growers.
- Create a permanent disaster relief program at USDA to ensure growers receive timely and reliable assistance following natural disasters.
- Increase funding for the Market Access Program (MAP) and the Technical Assistance for Specialty Crops (TASC) program to support export growth.
- Increase funding for critical research and pest prevention programs: SCRI, SCBG, IR-4, APHIS-PPA 7721, and the National Clean Plant Network.



- Continue support for nutrition programs that incentivize consumption of fruits and vegetables.

Tree Assistance Program

The 2014 Farm Bill authorized the [Tree Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#) to provide financial assistance to qualifying orchardists and nursery tree growers to replant or rehabilitate eligible trees, bushes and vines damaged by natural disasters.

We support the following improvements to TAP:

- Eliminating the 15% mortality threshold for assistance and bringing the program in line with the livestock indemnity program.
- Extending assistance to trees, bushes and vines that have not died but are no longer capable of production (not economically viable).
- Increasing the cost-share rate for rehabilitation from the current 50% to 65% to match the cost-share rate for replanting.
- Extending the period of time to carry out replacement and rehabilitation activities from the current 12 months to 2 years or more as determined by the Secretary.
- Eliminating the Adjusted Gross Income and payment limitations.
- Allowing growers to replant using an alternative variety and stand density
- Requiring FSA to respond to an application for assistance within 120 days.

Additional Talking Points:

- TAP is critically important for producers who must rehabilitate or replant a field following a natural disaster or pest/disease outbreak.
- Sometimes, a bush may no longer be capable of producing a viable crop, even if the bush is not dead. In this situation, a grower should be able to use TAP to replant.
- The current 12-month timeframe is insufficient to remove and replant a blueberry orchard, especially in response to plant disease infection. At least 24 months is needed to complete standard horticultural practices and prevent reinfection of plant diseases.
- Producers need the ability to replant with a different variety to be competitive following a loss. For instance, a different may be available that is more resistant to loss (i.e., drought, pest/disease, freeze), better suited for a changing climate, conducive to mechanical harvesting, or produces greater yields.
- It is not uncommon for a field to have a mortality rate of less than 15%, but still far greater than regular tree mortality.



Mechanization and Automation

- NABC recommends significantly increasing funding for all research programs that support the specialty crop industry.
- NABC urges Congress to include new dedicated funding for mechanization and automation research.

Additional Talking Points:

- U.S. agriculture must have access to advanced technologies to compete in the global market, particularly with rising input and labor challenges.
- At a time when input costs and pay rate for workers are at their highest, it's critical to ensure the agriculture industry has the necessary resources to modernize and not fall behind.

Crop Insurance

- The available crop insurance products for blueberries could be improved and expanded to better serve producers and reduce the overall risk pool.
- To ensure blueberry growers have access to effective crop insurance products, congress should:
 - Create a Specialty Crop Advisory Committee within the Risk Management Agency.
 - This would ensure RMA is working on improvements to specialty crop insurance products, which
 - Increase flexibility in data standards for new crop insurance standards and improve data collection.
 - For example, better data is needed to set an accurate established price and T-Yield.
 - For example, USDA should be able to expand existing products to nearby counties using. There are some blueberries producing counties that are not covered by the existing blueberry APH policy.
 - Codify enhancements that were made to the Whole Farm Revenue Insurance Program.
 - Direct RMA to research and potentially develop a Production Revenue History (PRH) policy for blueberries.

Additional Talking Points:

- Crop insurance participation by blueberry producers vary widely state-by-state. For example, in Washington State only 31% of blueberry acreage is insured compared to



70% in Michigan and 88% in Georgia. The primary reason for this discrepancy is the general effectiveness of the current blueberry policy.

- The available crop insurance products for blueberries could be improved and expanded upon to better serve producers and reduce the overall risk pool.
- Farm Bill report language would be helpful in directing RMA to prioritize research and development of crop insurance improvements for blueberries.

Agricultural Labor

- One of the biggest challenges facing U.S. blueberry growers today is the dwindling availability of domestic agricultural labor, leading to increased reliance on the H-2A Visa Program.
- While the H-2A Visa Program is vital to keeping the domestic blueberry industry running, The Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR) has driven up labor costs for growers year after year.
- Set annually by the Department of Labor, AEWR is based on the previous year's average wage, causing wage inflation in agriculture.
- Additionally, growers bear the added costs of transportation, housing, and administrative expenses under the H-2A program.
- Every blueberry-producing state saw an increase in the AEWR in 2023 and 2024.
- In 2025, the average AEWR for blueberry-producing states will reach \$17.86, while Canada's rate is \$11, and Mexico's is just \$1.50 per hour.
- With labor making up over 40% of blueberry producers' total expenses, increasing AEWR is placing financial strain on growers, leading to fewer H-2A employers in some regions.
- To address these rising costs, we urge Congress to support the Supporting Farm Operations Act, which would freeze the AEWR at the 2024 rate through 2026.
- This would provide relief for farmers and allow time for the Department of Labor and USDA to implement long-term reforms to the H-2A program.

State	2023 AEWR	2024 AEWR	2025 AEWR	Percent Change 2023 to 2025
California	\$18.65	\$19.75	\$19.97	7.08%
Florida	\$14.33	\$14.77	\$16.23	13.26%
Georgia	\$13.67	\$14.68	\$16.08	17.63%



Indiana	\$17.17	\$18.18	\$19.57	13.98%
Michigan	\$17.34	\$18.50	\$18.15	4.67%
Mississippi	\$13.67	\$14.53	\$14.83	8.49%
New Jersey	\$16.55	\$17.20	\$17.96	8.52%
North Carolina	\$14.91	\$15.81	\$16.16	8.38%
Oregon	\$17.97	\$19.25	\$19.82	10.29%
Washington	\$17.97	\$19.25	\$19.82	10.29%

Tax Policy

- NABC supports tax policies that strengthen the U.S. blueberry industry by fostering innovation, encouraging investment, and boosting domestic production.
- These key policy positions include:
 - Reducing tax burdens for family farmers and agricultural cooperatives through Section 199A & 199A(g) deductions.
 - Supporting bonus depreciation to enable immediate deductions for equipment and infrastructure investments.
 - Preserving family farms with estate tax exemptions and a stepped-up basis during land and equipment transfers.
 - Addressing rising labor costs with new tax policies to support U.S. blueberry farmers.
 - Encouraging innovation with new tax credits for agricultural technology investments.
 - Promoting sustainable practices with tax deductions for organic certification, conservation, energy-efficient equipment, and renewable energy systems.
 - Endorsing the “Supporting Innovation in Agriculture Act,” which offers a 30% refundable investment tax credit to boost adoption of advanced agricultural technologies.

Trade and Tariffs

- A 52-Week Blueberry Supply Benefits Everyone
 - Counter-seasonal imports play an important role in ensuring a consistent, year-round supply which has fueled significant growth in consumer demand for blueberries.



- Over the past decade, consumer demand for blueberries has skyrocketed. . According to USDA, per capita blueberry consumption grew by 97% between 2011 and 2021.
- Today’s families expect high quality blueberries to be available year-round at their local stores.
- To meet this demand, a stable and consistent supply is essential.
- Both domestic growers and importers play a vital role delivering a reliable, 52-week supply to consumers.
- The U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) has helped drive growth of the U.S. blueberry industry.
 - More than half of all U.S. blueberry exports go to Canada.
 - The U.S. is the largest export market for both Mexican and Canadian blueberries.
 - A recent Euromonitor study identified Canada and Mexico as the top two export opportunities for our U.S. blueberry growers.
 - U.S. growers have expanded their farming operations to Mexico to meet consumer demand when U.S. production is out of season.
 - U.S. growers ship their blueberries to Canada for freezing and storage, oftentimes returning to the U.S. market.
- The government can support domestic growers to compete at home and in international markets:
 - Invest in innovation – New plant varieties and advanced genetics is key to staying competitive, especially as U.S. growers face challenges from emerging markets.
 - The Tree Assistance Program (TAP) helps growers transition to new varieties, allowing them to compete with newer markets who have built their industries on these newly developed plants.
 - Level the playing field - U.S. growers face some of the highest regulatory and labor costs in the world.