

This Week in DC --- March 27, 2023

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack will testify before congressional committees over three straight days this week, and FDA Commissioner Robert Califf also will face lawmakers, who are certain to have questions about his ongoing reorganization of the agency's human foods program.

Other senior administration officials who will be on Capitol Hill for a flurry of hearings ahead of lawmakers' two-week Easter recess include EPA Administrator Michael Regan, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland, Securities and Exchange Commission Chairman Gary Gensler and Commodity Futures Trading Commission Chairman Rostin Behnam.

Vilsack will testify before the House Agriculture Committee on Tuesday and then face the Senate and House Agriculture Appropriations subcommittees on Wednesday and Thursday respectively.

Vilsack is likely to hear a wide array of concerns from the department's focus on climate to nutrition assistance. President Joe Biden's fiscal 2024 calls for a 14% increase in discretionary funding for USDA. Discretionary spending is allocated by annual appropriations bills rather than mandated by laws such as the farm bill.

Califf, who has been battling with the food industry and consumer advocates over his reorganization plan, will appear before the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee on Wednesday.

FDA also will be under scrutiny on Tuesday when Frank Yiannas, FDA's former deputy commissioner of food policy and response, is the lone witness at a House Oversight and Accountability Committee hearing on the 2022 infant formula crisis. Yiannas announced his resignation shortly before Califf released his reorganization plan, which didn't go as far as recommended in a December report from the Reagan-Udall Foundation.

Oversight Committee Chairman James Comer, R-Ky., and Subcommittee on Health Care and Financial Services Chairwoman Lisa McClain, R-Mich., wrote FDA on Tuesday, demanding documents and communications related to the agency's handling of the infant formula issue.

"The Committee is concerned that the FDA's restructuring is a superficial attempt—rather than a real effort—to bring accountability and make meaningful changes," the lawmakers wrote.

Ahead of this week's hearings, some FDA officials and industry leaders were on Capitol Hill to brief congressional staff on their view of the FDA's reorganization plan. The speakers included Stephen Ostroff, former FDA deputy commissioner of food policy; Brian Ronholm, director of food policy for Consumer Reports; and former FDA official Roberta Wagner, vice president of regulatory and technical affairs for Consumer Brands Association.

Califf is creating a new position of deputy commissioner for human foods and has promised the person who's hired will have "clear decision-making authority." Critics say the deputy commissioner will lack the direct line authority that is needed.

Also this week, the House Appropriations Committee on Wednesday will hold a special oversight hearing this week on an array of rural issues.

The administration witnesses will include Lenita Jacobs-Simmons, deputy assistant secretary for the Labor Department's Employment and Training Administration; Tom Morris, associate administrator for rural health policy in the Health Resources and Services Administration, part of the Health and Human Services Department; and Ruth Ryder, deputy secretary for policy and programs in the Education Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.