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by Steve Kopperud
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House Recesses Until Post-Election; Heavy Lifting Shifts to Lame Duck

The House cleared its agenda – sending the president a stop-gap FY2019 spending package and approving a second tax reform bill making personal tax cuts permanent – and recessed last Friday until after the November 6 midterm elections, giving members six weeks of all-out campaigning. Meanwhile, the Senate is expected to remain in session at least until Supreme Court nominee Judge Brett Kavanaugh's nomination gets a full Senate vote, which may come as early as October 6. This means any substantive lawmaking now pends until the lame duck session in late November-early December, but what if anything gets done depends wholly on the results of the midterm elections.

Farm Bill Progress Negligible; Current Law Lapses, but USDA May Step In

With nary a single title closed out thus far, 2018 Farm Bill conference committee progress can only be described as incremental at best, and with the House recessed until after the November 6 midterm elections, a new omnibus farm program package will have to wait until the lame duck session.

At the same time, current farm program authority has lapsed absent a new Farm Bill, but Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Pat Roberts (R, KS) rejected seeking to extend current law. The Kansas lawmaker said an extension could backfire on negotiators by "taking away the urgency to get things done."

Punting the bill into the lame duck session has some lawmakers nervous given the unknown outcome of the midterm elections. Several House members fear if the Republicans lose their chamber majority they also lose the clout to get any compromise Farm Bill through the process. Sen. Heidi Heitkamp (D, ND), facing a tough reelection, fears "there may not be the political will to get it done" after the midterms. At the same time, the time pressure is on conferees to have a deal in place by mid-October so that the language can be formalized and finalized for a vote come lame duck.

House, Senate Sniping

The "Big Four" – Roberts, House Agriculture Committee Chair Mike Conaway (R, TX) and their respective ranking members, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D, MI) and Rep. Collin Peterson (D, MN) – met in person again this week, emerging from their meeting trying to put as good a face on Farm Bill progress as possible after Conaway last Friday blamed the Senate generally and the Democrats specifically for foot dragging on compromise negotiations in hopes the midterm elections favor the Democrats.

“Right now, I don’t get the sense that getting something done has quite the sense of urgency with my Senate colleagues as it does with me,” Conaway said in a statement. His frustration was echoed by a harsher shot at Senate Democrats by House conferee Rep. Ralph Abraham (R, LA), who said, “Sadly, America’s farmers have been caught up in the political games of the swamp. Each time we think we have an agreement, Sen. Stabenow and the Senate Democrats move the goal posts, asking for ridiculous things like crop insurance for roof top gardens and other urban farm priorities,” alleging such moves put conventional ag programs at risk.

“Playing politics is not going to get the Farm Bill done,” Stabenow responded.

Emerging from their face-to-face meeting and after a photo op showing the four lawmakers arm in arm, Stabenow said the four are “close” to closing out a group of titles, adding “it’s complicated and takes time. We’re continuing to work away.” Stabenow wouldn’t say which titles are close to agreement, but Conaway earlier said the trade and credit titles were closed but had to back off that statement. “The big titles are still open. There’s disagreements on commodity, conservation and energy,” Stabenow said.

Open, Divisive Issues

There’s still no hint of an agreement on how to modify House language that would require more Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients to work or be in training for at least 20 hours a week. At the same time, a budget maneuver by the House to help pay for some its commodity program changes have Conaway and Roberts locking horns.

Back in the 1996 Farm Bill – dubbed “Freedom to Farm” and authored in large part by Roberts who was then chair of the House ag panel – farmers were eligible for program payments on base acres not planted to program crops for the previous 10 years. Killing that provision in the 2018 Farm Bill would save $900 million and allow USDA to pay for revising yield averages for farmers participating in the Price Loss Coverage (PLC) program and who’ve weathered severe drought. Roberts said killing the program is unfair and runs counter to the planting flexibility freedom that was the heart of “Freedom to Farm.” Conway said the payments to farmers for keeping land in grass for more than a decade is unjustified today.

Divisions over how to modernize the conservation title also run deep. The House would kill the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and use the savings to pay for other conservation priorities and changes in the broader House bill. The Senate makes almost no changes in current conservation programs save for a modest increase in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) cap. On energy, again, the House kills off nearly the entire alternative energy initiative at USDA, while the Senate only tinkers with existing programs.

“Orphan Programs,” USDA Support

In any event, the conferees missed the September 30 deadline to get a new law in place before the 2014 law expired. Even with current law expired, commodity payments, crop insurance, big ticket conservation programs, SNAP and other permanently authorized and funded programs continue to operate. However, there are about 40 “orphan programs” which will begin to shut down by the end of October when USDA authority to spend money runs out. USDA’s Farm Service Agency (FSA), for instance, has already told its field offices to cease accepting applications or finalizing new contracts for the CRP and a handful of smaller conservation programs.

Roberts said he and the rest of the senior quartet of negotiators have talked to USDA about protecting the so-called “orphan programs” by keeping them running as long as the department is able. “We’re making arrangements so that they don’t close in the interim period. The same thing happened in 2012. That’s not the way we would have liked to have seen it, but I think they know they will be fully funded. It’s just right now, there’s a hiccup,” he said. However, he wouldn’t provide details on how that might come off, other than to say, “It’s not business as usual.”

However, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said his hands may be tied in many instances when it comes to keeping “expired” programs running. He said it’s likely inevitable USDA will have to choose which programs it will temporarily fund. “We’re going to do everything we can for all the programs under the ’14 Farm Bill to keep them manageable for what we’re legally allowed to do,” Perdue said. “We’re going to be as selective as we can in maintaining the status quo of the ’14 farm bill if we’re legally permitted to do so.” He said he may be legally blocked from certain spending options, “but we’re going to be as flexible as we can.”

U.S., Canada Strike NAFTA 2.0 Agreement; Mexico Deal to be Merged, Package Heads to Congress

The U.S. and Canada late last weekend announced they’d reached a handshake agreement on their outstanding cross-border NAFTA 2.0 issues, setting up at long last the formal melding of the U.S.’s separate deals with Mexico and Canada and creating the trilateral U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). Once ratified, the new $1.2-trillion treaty replaces the 24-year-old NAFTA.

Both the U.S. and Canada peppered the airwaves with tough talk prior to announcing the deal – President Trump repeatedly threatened the U.S. would go ahead with its bilateral deal with Mexico, leaving Canada at the gate, and slap heavy tariffs on Canada’s auto industry; the Canadians would survive the death of NAFTA if it meant a less-than-great deal for Canada.

When the dust settled, U.S. Special Trade Representative (USTR) Robert Lighthizer and Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland issued a joint statement saying, “USMCA will give our workers, our farmers, ranchers and businesses a high-standard trade agreement that will result in freer markets, fairer trade and robust economic growth in our region. It will strengthen the middle class and create good, well-paying jobs and new opportunities for the nearly half billion people who call North America home.”

The major turning point in the talks, observers and trade analysts say, was when the U.S. relented and ceded to Canada retention of NAFTA's "old" Chapter 19 special trade dispute resolution processes. The Canadians did not want to lose their ability to challenge another USMCA member's tariffs, and the U.S. blinked even as called Lighthizer called the Canadian demand a direct assault on U.S. sovereignty.

U.S. Treaty Wins

The details of the preliminary agreement are broad at this point, but the ag community is relieved that the $34-billion tariff-free cross-border trade will continue. The highlights of the U.S. achievements on agricultural product exports include the following:

- The Canadians relented and agreed to cancel their Class 7 dairy pricing support system within six months of formal USMCA implementation, called a "deal breaker" by the U.S. throughout the talks. This is a major victory for the U.S. as northern tier dairy producers contend the Class 7 support for high-protein dairy byproducts, including fortified skim milk powder, shuts out competing U.S. dairy, and artificially props up world prices;
- Another major victory for the U.S. was Canada's agreement to phase in greater U.S. milk and dairy products access through a new tariff rate quota (TRQ) system for milk, cheese, cream, skim milk powder, butter, ice cream, whey and other products. It's estimated the U.S. will have access to about another 3.6% of the Canadian market, a better deal than it would have achieved as part of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), said one analyst;
- Greater access for U.S. poultry and egg products was achieved when Canada agreed to set up new TRQs. There's a new 57,000-ton quota for chicken after six years, and the quota on eggs increase 10 million dozen after the first year;
- U.S. wheat exports will move more freely into Canada as that nation agreed to change the way it grades wheat imports by recognizing international standards and wheat quality;
- While its broad federal agriculture supply management system was acknowledged to be too intricate to dismantle entirely, the U.S. imposed "new disciplines" on how the system is imposed;
- Canada agreed to more timely reviews and approvals of ag and food products developed using biotechnology and gene editing;
- The two nations signed off on more science-based trading standards, along with significantly stronger labor and environmental protections;
- The treaty contains a 63-page section outlining new intellectual patent, trademark and intellectual property rights protections covering biotechnology, financial services and internet domain names, and
- Generally, Chapter 11, which provides investors a club with which to go after government decisions that lose them money, is eliminated, save for telecommunications and energy.

Next Steps

The U.S.-Canada agreement was achieved just minutes before the U.S.-set midnight deadline

September 30 – part of President Trump's trade promotion authority (TPA) obligation – but also so outgoing President Enrique Nieto Pena can sign the new treaty before he leaves office December 1. Once the White House approves the final product – "I plan to sign the agreement by the end of November," Trump said, in sync with similar planned action by Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Mexico's Nieto Pena – it moves to congressional oversight hearings. The Senate Finance Committee and House Ways & Means Committee are expected to easily ratify the deal, if only on party line votes. In the end and under the terms of TPA, Congress gets only an up or down vote – no amendments allowed.

Despite Senate Finance Committee Chair Orrin Hatch's (R, UT) desire to move the USMCA during the lame duck session, process and politics will like mean congressional action on the trilateral treaty won't occur until the new Congress convenes in 2019. USMCA's path to approval will rely heavily on the outcome of the November 6 midterm elections and which party is in charge in which/both chambers. The ultimate approval of the treaty also means overcoming what Senate Majority Whip John Cornyn (R, TX) calls the "visceral opposition" by many Democrats to "everything this president proposes." However, House Agriculture Committee ranking member Rep. Collin Peterson (D, MN) said this week that even if the House goes Democrat, the chamber will likely vote and approve USMCA during the lame duck session.

Kudos, Brickbats, Political Wait-and-See on USMCA

While it's fair to say preserving the $34-billion cross-border free trade zone enjoyed under NAFTA is of and by itself a huge victory for U.S. agriculture, reaction to the soon-to-be new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) is not universally positive, though most are keeping their powder dry until they read the fine print on the new trilateral trade treaty.

USDA sent out a three-page press release quoting various governors, state secretaries of agriculture, cabinet secretaries, members of Congress, "stakeholder groups," and media reports, all praising the new North American trade pact. However, there was no dearth of press releases evincing skepticism of the deal or outright opposition.

"The U.S. benefits when all three countries are held to the high standards laid out in Trade Promotion Authority," said House Speaker Paul Ryan (R, WI) in a carefully worded statement. "That's why I'm pleased that the Trump administration succeeded in bringing Canada into the fold to reach a trilateral agreement. I look forward to reviewing the text, particularly the dairy provisions, and engaging with members and stakeholders on the details."

While Senate Agriculture Committee Chair Pat Roberts (R, KS) praised the new treaty for giving farmers and ranchers "much-needed export market certainty," Rep. Kevin Brady (R, TX), chair of the House Ways & Means Committee, one of the panels which must ratify the new treaty, praised the White House for delivering a trade pact, but gave no opinion of the new treaty. "Now that the full text is available, the public and lawmakers can carefully analyze the trade proposal in an open and transparent process," Brady said. He did allow "we will be looking for ways to advance a three-country agreement."

Key Ways & Means Democrats said they'll wait to see the final text before deciding if the USMCA is better than the old NAFTA treaty. "The bar for supporting a new NAFTA will be high," said Rep. Richard Neal (D, MA), ranking member of the committee. Neal's counterpart on the Senate Finance Committee, which must also bless the treaty, Sen. Ron Wyden (D, OR) said, "The crucial test for a new NAFTA, or any new trade agreement, is whether it is enforceable, particularly with respect to worker rights and the environment."

President Trump took full credit – chalking up another campaign promise fulfillment – also accepting vindication for his "threaten-loudly-and-swing-a-big-stick" negotiating style, saying the new treaty gives him leverage in his on-going trade battles with China. He called the new USMCA "the most important trade deal we've ever made by far," adding the new treaty will "transform the U.S. back into a manufacturing powerhouse." Trump referred to the old NAFTA treaty as the "worst deal" the U.S. had ever signed.

Trump also made it clear the one concession he did not allow in either the Canadian or Mexican NAFTA talks was removal of his controversial steel/aluminum tariffs against the two trading partners, a move he argues is necessary to save the U.S. steel industry. "No, no, the steel tariff is staying where it is – and aluminum. Without tariffs we wouldn't be talking about a deal, just for those babies out there that keep talking about tariffs," he said.

Many of those "babies" are agricultural groups who remain the target of 10-20% retaliatory tariffs by major U.S. trading partners, including Mexico and Canada – impacted by the steel/aluminum tariffs. "It is important to note that the retaliatory duties imposed by Mexico on U.S. pork, and by Canada on U.S. prepared/cooked beef products remain in place," said the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) in a statement.

Sonny Perdue, secretary of agriculture, admitted the success of USMCA is limited because of the retaliatory tariffs still plaguing U.S. producers. "We do know that it has some dampening effect on the benefits for agriculture in this agreement, so we look forward to that being resolved very soon," Perdue said.

The Organization for Competitive Markets (OCM) isn't happy the new deal ignores reinstatement of country-of-origin labeling, calling the controversial system "a crucial component of a fair market."

And while dairy producers are considered big winners in the U.S.-Canada talks, National Milk Producers Federation (NMPF) President Jim Mulhern, on behalf of a coalition of dairy groups, said, "Canada will remain a largely self-contained, protected milk market," calling the treaty concessions on dairy access "incremental progress." For itself, the Dairy Farmers of Canada said in a statement that its government's elimination of Class 6 and 7 pricing was like "death by a thousand cuts," alleging the government used farmers as a bargain chip.

And while the Trump team touts new language modernizing sanitary/phytosanitary standards (SPFs), big agribusiness companies are not happy the new USMCA treaty will not carry their version of new food safety standards. A number of these companies subscribe to "new thinking" necessary to integrate trilateral SPF standards under what's called "new thinking" on joint risk assessment. "The need to act jointly is heightened by the 'One Health' paradigm, which recognizes that the health of people is increasingly connected to the health of animals and the environment," said a paper by two Canadian think tanks released this week. The approach is not part of the new treaty, rather with a few tweaks, the three countries retain their current SPF programs.

China Talks at Impasse; U.S.-Japan Begin Talks U.S.; U.S., Korea Sign KORUS; UK Talks in Mix

While there may be new U.S.-China talks late next month, says the White House, this week it rolled out several trade "advances" this week in the wake of its victory on bringing Canada into the fold on the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). The U.S. and South Korea formally inked the new U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), Japan and the U.S. agreed to talk a bilateral trade deal, and President Trump said steps are being taken to cut a trade deal with India, while Trump is expected to "affirm" progress on a post-Brexit U.S.-United Kingdom (UK) trade treaty.

When China abruptly cancelled talks with the U.S. after this country imposed another $200 billion in tariffs 10 days ago, progress to end the tariff tit-for-tat ground to a halt. Now, with USMCA in hand, the White House believes it's sending a signal to the Chinese to return to the bargaining table, the new treaty demonstrating the U.S. is serious in resolving trade disputes. Economic advisor Larry Kudlow this week said the U.S. has "new leverage" in dealing with China because of the USMCA, but so far, China's response has been "unsatisfactory." The Chinese contend the U.S. keeps shifting positions on various issues, and to date, "nothing the U.S. has done has given any impression of sincerity and goodwill," reports the *Wall Street Journal*. The next shot at a meeting may be November 30, on the sidelines of the G20 economic summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Kudlow said.

This week, President Trump and Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe announced their two nations have agreed to begin direct negotiations to come up with a bilateral trade deal that will make U.S. agriculture and the automobile industry happy. The White House said Japan's agreement is due in part to Trump's threat to impose tariffs on U.S. automobile imports, including cars from Japan. For two years, Abe has said the U.S. and Japan don't need a bilateral trade deal, suggesting instead the U.S. rejoin the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) under which agriculture would receive the same benefits as other TPP nations when it comes to Japanese market access – "these constitute the maximum level" of access.

Finalized late last year, the U.S. and Korean formally signed their revised free trade agreement September 24, during the United Nations General Assembly meeting at which Trump spoke. "We are entering into a new KORUS agreement that is a better deal for the entire U.S. economy, including the agricultural sector. This represents an important improvement in trade relations between our two nations, building on long-standing cooperation we have enjoyed," said Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue.

The White House restated its support for a U.S.-UK trade deal, saying, "We do want to move forward with a bilateral with the UK, and we do intend to notify Congress at the appropriate time."

WTO, Enviro Group Questions U.S. Farmer Tariff Assistance

Even as USDA announced this week it's paid out so far $53 million in direct cash assistance to farmers hurt by retaliatory tariffs imposed by U.S. trading partners, along with another $78 million in requests under process, World Trade Organization (WTO) member nations continue to question the legality of the program under WTO rules.

In a related move, the Environmental Working Group (EWG) last week filed a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request with USDA for all details related to USDA's payments to farmers. EWG is famous for having compiled an on-line Farm Subsidy Database (www.ewg.org) through which anyone receiving federal commodity or conservation payments can be tracked.

EWG wants the names and addresses of corn, dairy, hog, sorghum, soybean, cotton and wheat farmers who receive checks, and the amount of each check in direct assistance. EWG said the government is required by law to make such information public "so that taxpayers who are paying the tab know where their money is going."

At last week's WTO agriculture committee meeting in Geneva, Switzerland, the U.S. assured WTO members the farm aid program is a one-time-only policy, running from September, 2018, through the end of January, 2019. The U.S. also said it will not exceed its WTO "trade distorting" payment spending limit. Producers are chosen to receive assistance, the U.S. said, based on lost sales because of retaliatory tariffs imposed by trading partners impacted by U.S. tariffs.

House Approves Bill Making Personal Tax Cuts Permanent

The House approved on a 220-191 vote legislation – "Tax Reform 2.0" – that would make permanent personal and unincorporated tax rate reductions included in last December's federal tax reform bill signed by President Trump. The Senate, however, has no plans to take up the bill this year.

"With the time we have, that's not going to be considered," said Sen. Pat Roberts (R, KS), a senior member of the Senate Finance Committee. In any event, it would take 60 votes to move the bill to the Senate floor and the GOP isn't sure the votes are there.

Nevertheless, the House Republicans see the move as playing to their voting base in the November midterm elections.

The bill would put the personal tax cuts, mostly set to expire at the end of 2025, on the same legal footing as the permanent tax cuts – a drop from 35% to 21% -- bestowed on incorporated businesses. Along with the reduction in personal federal tax rates, the bill makes permanent the 20% tax rate on income from so-called "pass-throughs."

Three Democrats crossed the aisle to vote in favor of the measure. However, a passel of Republicans from high-tax states, including New York, New Jersey, Illinois and California, either voted against the bill or held their collective noses, expressing their continuing displeasure with a provision of the bill limiting permanently state and local tax deductions to $10,000.

EPA Notes

Trump Expected to Announce E15 Change in Iowa Next Week -- When President Trump travels to the Midwest next week on a campaign barnstorm, he's expected to finally announce at a rally in Council Bluffs, Iowa, that EPA will allow year-round sale of E15. Ethanol makers are not quite counting their chicken yet because Trump has promised several times of the past months to clear the way for year-round E15 sales, but has not yet delivered. In any event, any administration move is likely to draw legal action from the petroleum industry. Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said back in August the president had called and told him, "Let's get it done." However, complicating the final announcement has been lingering concerns within EPA that it lacks the full legal authority to waive the restrictions on E15 sales, coupled with a White House desire to create a "win-win" scenario that provides petroleum refiners some Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS) they demand. A Reuters report indicates the announcement could include new restrictions on Renewable Identification Number (RIN) trading designed to discourage speculation and reduce costs to refiners.

AFBF Pushes Again to WOTUS Protection; Wheeler says Expect Replacement in 30 Days – The American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF) last week again filed in a Georgia federal court a petition seeking an injunction to halt potential implementation of the Obama administration's "waters of the U.S. (WOTUS)" final rule. AFBF asked the court to expand its previous 11-state injunction to the 22 states not currently protected from rule enforcement under previous federal court actions. The country's largest farm organization argued that a national injunction is needed to correct what it called a "regulatory patchwork" of various court actions. The AFBF took the action after a South Carolina court said the current EPA's efforts to repeal and replace the Obama WOTUS rule was invalid. Meanwhile, EPA Acting Administrator Andrew Wheeler told industry this week that EPA will propose its replacement WOTUS rulemaking "in the next 30 days or so," action designed to return "regulatory certainty for American businesses, environmental organizations and the American people."

Enviros Sue EPA to End CAFO Exemption on Reporting – EPA was hit this week with a federal lawsuit brought by a coalition of 10 environmental groups seeking to kill an exemption from hazardous substance reporting enjoyed by concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs). The groups contend the agency violated the Administrative Procedures Act (APA) in failing to get public comment when it administratively ruled CAFOs did not have to report to local officials emissions under Emergency Planning & Community Right-to-Know (EPCRA) authority. CERCLA now carries a CAFO exemption thanks to language tucked into the omnibus spending bill enacted last March, and EPA used that authority to grant the EPCRA exemption. Democrats on the Senate Environment & Public Works Committee took public exception to EPA's move, saying that was not the intent of the CERCLA exemption language.

CFTC Actions

Giancarlo Wants to Kick International Swaps Rule – Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) Chair Chris Giancarlo this week released his "Cross-Border Swaps Regulation Version 2.0" white paper, a study which gives Giancarlo the basis for recommending to the rest of the CFTC that existing international swaps rules be rewritten. “I have been a constant supporter of the swaps market reforms…in Dodd-Frank,” said Giancarlo. In restating his support for the commitment of the G20 leaders in 2009, he added, “Those are clearing standardized swaps through central counterparties, reporting swaps to trade repositories and trading standardized swaps on regulated trading platforms. However, I have long said that I hold reservations about the CFTC’s current approach to applying its swaps rules to cross-border activities.” He said the current regulation of cross-border swaps is “over-expansive, unduly complex and operationally impractical” and increases trading costs for companies. He said if the CFTC does not “pare back the overreach” means a continued lack of cooperation from non-U.S. regulators.

Iowa Broker, Traders Get CFTC Enforcement Orders – Alleging violations of the Commodity Exchange Act (CEA) and Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC) regulations, the CFTC last week filed two enforcement orders to settle charges against a broker and two commodity traders. One case settles actions against Kooima & Kaemingk Commodities (K&K) – requiring an $11.9-million restitution order to customers in Iowa, Maryland, Minnesota, South Dakota and Nebraska – and two individuals for fraud, unauthorized trading and making false/misleading statements to the CME Group related to a former employee’s fraud, unauthorized trading and violation of live cattle futures contract position limits and for corporate supervision failure. In addition to the restitution order, K&K must pay a civil fine of $1.25 million. A second case saw the commission issue and order against two individuals – Adam Flavin (Flavin order) and Peter Grady (Grady order), traders at a commodity merchandising firm, this time for filing and settling simultaneously charges as part of an attempted price manipulation of certain wheat futures and options contracts on the Chicago Board of Trade (CBOT). The Flavin order carries a $125,000 civil penalty and a four-year trading ban; the Grady order carries a $250,000 civil penalty and a nine-month trading ban.

Contact Us
Kathy Zander, Executive Director
Roxanne Rice, Finance Director
Phone: 605/224-2445
Fax: 605/224-9913
Email: info@sdaba.org
Website: www.sdaba.org