

Moratorium would 'turn out lights' at USDA

By **ROBERT GREENE**
AP Farm Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — To hear farmers talk, they'd be more than happy if the government sat down, took a breath, and quit making regulations for a while.

After all, they argue, bureaucrats have brought endless hassles over calling a damp pothole in the prairie a protected wetland, raised the cost of chilling milk because of a ban on Freon 12, imposed unworkable new rules for worker safety on pesticide use.

But the Agriculture Department contends that a moratorium could mow down rules that define "fresh chicken" and the humane treatment of marine-park dolphins, and how farmers can market their produce.

A moratorium bill passed in the House on Friday would prohibit agencies from imposing any new rules until Dec. 31, 1995, and suspend any rules issued since Nov. 20 last year. The bill now goes to the Senate.

A Democratic farm-state lawmaker warns the Republican proposal would backfire on corn growers eager to convert their crop into clean-burning ethanol fuel.

"What we're basically doing is turning the lights out in the U.S. department of Agriculture in so many different areas," said Rep. Richard J. Durbin, D-Ill., who has sounded the alarm on the ethanol issue.

President Clinton last week said the proposal would block a major overhaul of meat and poultry inspections proposed Feb. 3 by the

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Department's Food Safety and Inspection Service to guard the public against food poisoning.

A moratorium would block a proposed rule, published Jan. 17, forbidding poultry that has been chilled below 26 degrees Fahrenheit from being labeled as "fresh."

On Jan. 6, within the moratorium timetable, the department issued new rules overhauling crop disaster aid by requiring farmers to take out a basic crop insurance policy. The overhaul is supposed to save taxpayers money by freeing Congress from handing out disaster checks.

Consumers and producers wanting a national standard for organic foods, mandated in the 1990 Farm Bill, would have to wait even longer.

Seasonal regulations governing the pricing and sale of milk, fruits and vegetables under so-called marketing orders must be issued. Although marketing orders, established in 1937, have come under criticism as anti-consumer and anti-competitive, a moratorium could simply slam on the brakes.

The department is working on a research and promotion program, financed by the nation's sheep producers, to make U.S. products more competitive against those produced overseas. The program would replace the government wool and mohair program that Congress killed in 1993.

A rule to prohibit the face-branding of imported Mexican cattle would fall by the wayside. So would

rules governing the humane treatment of dolphins at marine parks.

The department's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service routinely issues quarantine rules to guard U.S. borders against diseased animals or plants. On Dec. 22, 1994, beef imports from Portugal were prohibited because of problems with "mad cow disease."

The moratorium is supposed to make exceptions for health threats to humans or endangerment of private property. The department says the exception would allow disease threats to snowball before action could be taken.

But farmers could really feel the moratorium's bite because of ethanol, says Durbin, whose state is a leading corn producer.

The administration issued final rules last June 30, outside the moratorium timetable, requiring ethanol in new, cleaner fuels.

But the rules are in court because of a lawsuit from the petroleum industry, and a decision is not expected until spring. Some modification is inevitable, Durbin argues, and any change becomes a new rule covered by the moratorium.

Still, the American Farm Bureau Federation favors the moratorium.

Farm Bureau economists estimate that regulations cost agriculture between \$18 billion and \$20 billion a year, spokesman Christopher Noun said.

The moratorium, he said, "gives us a chance to kind of just say, hold on, let's wait a second, let's see if we're doing the right thing through these regulations."