

In a Chaotic Year, Mother Nature Piles On

Top Ten Topics: Third Quarter 2020



The coronavirus crisis continued to dominate the attention of prominent figures in the food industry, with food insecurity leading a long list of concerns in the third quarter of 2020. The ongoing impact of unemployment — a result of pandemic-reduction policies — greatly increased the number of Americans who face hunger each day. This, in turn, led to debates about the best policies to aid food-insecure Americans.

Adding supply chain disruptions to the picture made companies' food waste policies even more pertinent, setting the stage for future restructuring. Businesses have begun reconsidering their goals for stewardship, workforce and production practices. We examined these factors earlier this quarter in our [Four Forces Inspiring Food Brands](#) perspective.

Even as the coronavirus pandemic continued to disrupt food systems, extreme weather events claimed the second spot in this quarter's ranks. The weather generally garners more attention in the third quarter with the arrival of harvest and the peak of hurricane season. This year, Mother Nature added drought, wildfires and a derecho to farmers' and ranchers' list of concerns. It was nearly enough to compete with the pandemic.

Additionally, we sifted through the presidential candidates' policies for topics relevant to food and agriculture. The accompanying piece, [Ag on the Ballot](#), can be found on [Page 6](#).

1. U.S. Hunger

Food-related welfare policy and food insecurity in the United States



Hunger remains a looming topic as mass unemployment caused by the pandemic led to a sharp rise in food insecurity, nationally and globally. In mid-August, The United Nations Food & Agriculture Organization captured the global situation in a 320-page

assessment that [estimated](#) world hunger is on a trajectory from its current 8.9% to 9.8% of the population by 2030, and that the pandemic will have caused as many as 132 million people to be malnourished.

Chronicling the issue of U.S. hunger, The New York Times Magazine [dedicated](#) its entire September 2 issue to the topic: “America at Hunger’s Edge.” On September 27, NPR [posted](#) a “by the numbers” report on U.S. food security, noting a huge uptick in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, aka food stamps) enrollment and higher levels of hunger for children and Black families.

On August 28, the Trump administration’s Farmers to Families Food Box Program [declared](#) that a milestone 75 million boxes of farm goods have been delivered via food banks. Politico’s Helena Bottemiller Evich [reported](#)

that food banks discarded letters signed by President Trump due to concerns that he was “using the levers of government and taxpayer dollars for self-promotion as he runs for re-election.”

Food manufacturers and retailers are especially well-equipped to respond to hunger gaps. Dunkin’ Brands contributed more than \$2 million in emergency hunger relief grants for underserved communities ([QSR Magazine](#)). Tyson Foods, Inc. [announced](#) completion of its pledge to donate 120 million servings of protein to food banks. In September, The Kroger Co., the second-largest retailer in the U.S., [introduced](#) “Zero Hunger | Zero Waste,” a partnership with Feeding America and World Wildlife Fund aimed at providing 3 billion meals by 2025.

The irony is not lost that within the same month, Feeding America [marked](#) September 10 as Hunger Action Day, while the United Nations [declared](#) September 29 its first International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste. USDA’s Food Loss and Waste Liaison Jean Buzby [suggested](#) that “The COVID-19 pandemic highlights that we now have an opportunity to rethink the way in which we produce, handle and waste our food.”

2. Weather

Weather conditions and their effect on farming

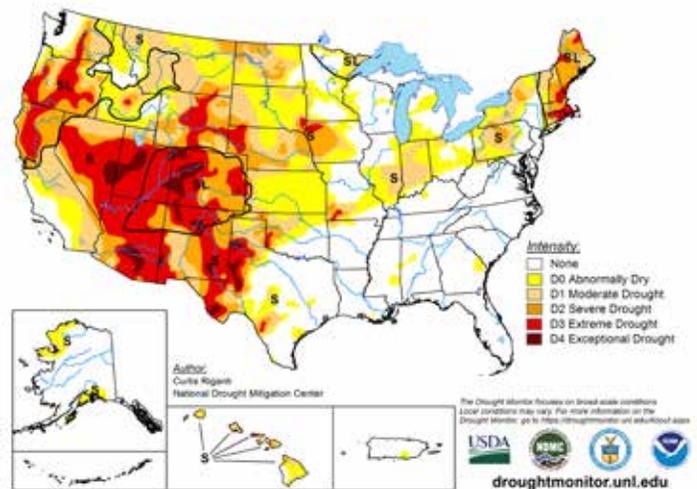


A perennial topic, weather conversations got a boost from a variety of extreme events in the third quarter. A derecho [swept across](#) the Midwest on August 10, damaging 37.7 million acres of farmland (Reuters) and [mangling](#) grain storage bins (DTN/Progressive Farmer). The storm

[flattened](#) as much as one-third of Iowa’s cropland (Des Moines Register), but crop scouts [told](#) AgProfessional that drought may have a greater impact on the state’s harvest.

By the end of the quarter, U.S. Drought Monitor [observed](#) that “worsening drought remained a major concern across much of the western half of the country.” The group classified much of the Southwest as being under “extreme drought,” and similar levels of drought have contributed to wildfires in Oregon and northern California. Modern Farmer [highlighted](#) how farmers have had to fight brush fires with limited aid from firefighters. Eater [tracked](#) wineries and restaurants that have been destroyed by the fires. Food & Wine [noted](#) that grapes harvested from the area are likely tainted by smoke.

Despite the unusually active hurricane season, few of the storms disrupted food or agriculture production. USA Rice

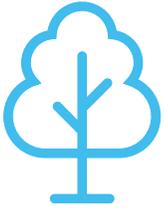


Source: U.S. Drought Monitor

Federation [noted](#) that most of the rice crop had been harvested before Hurricane Laura hit Louisiana on August 27. Hurricane Sally, which made landfall on September 16, hit pecan orchards and cotton farms in Alabama and western Florida; University of Florida [estimated](#) \$55 million to \$100 million in losses.

3. Stewardship

Environmental management of the land, water and air quality on and around farms and ranches



Lawmakers, researchers and corporations drove an uptick in conversations about farm stewardship practices. The House Select Committee on the Climate Crisis [released](#) an action plan, outlining “a path to net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050” by expanding conservation

programs and funding additional research. The Organic Trade Association [released](#) “Advancing Organic to Mitigate Climate Change,” the organization’s 10-tiered approach to addressing stewardship, climate and health issues.

California, where one-third of U.S. vegetables and two-thirds of the nation’s fruits and nuts are grown, proved to

be a focal point for the interaction of climate change and stewardship practices. A Berkeley Lab study [predicted](#) that air temperatures will force farmers to reconsider regions where certain crops are planted. [The New York Times](#) and [San Francisco Chronicle](#) highlighted how heat and smoke from wildfires affect farmworker conditions.

With Climate Week as a backdrop, food company leaders outlined sustainability commitments. Notable announcements from [Walmart](#), [McDonald’s Corporation](#) and [General Mills, Inc.](#), featured regenerative agricultural practices. Earlier in the quarter, Burger King stirred conversations when the chain [announced](#) that it would add lemongrass to its cows’ diets to reduce methane emissions. UC Davis professor Frank Mitloehner, PhD, [questioned](#) the strength of Burger King’s claims (Civil Eats).

4. Food Safety

Foodborne illness, related recalls and regulation



Food safety moved up in the rankings, mainly due to new government actions, food recalls and ongoing COVID-19-related concerns.

After more than a year of work and collaboration, the FDA [released](#) its “New Era of Smarter Food Safety”

blueprint. FDA Commissioner Stephen Hahn [stated](#), “Our ultimate goal is to bend the curve of foodborne illness in this country by reducing the number of illnesses.” Paused FDA inspections [resumed](#) in July with pre-announced domestic inspections for FDA-regulated businesses (Food Safety News). In September, food safety regulators implemented key parts of the Food Safety Modernization Act and advanced public health goals outlined in Healthy People 2030. USDA FSIS [released](#) its “Roadmap to Address Salmonella” and Food Safety News [explored](#) details of a

“WE ARE ENTERING THE GOLDEN AGE OF SINGLE-SERVE. I THINK WE’RE GOING TO HAVE A LONG, SLOW DECLINE OF BUFFETS AND SO ON.”

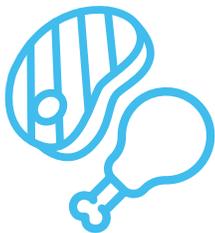
NANCY KRUSE, MENU ANALYST,
FOOD BUSINESS NEWS

proposed food traceability rule introduced by the FDA. Feedstuffs [reported](#) on the modernization of egg product inspection rules, requiring federally inspected plants to establish hazard analysis and critical control points (HACCP) systems and operating procedures.

Government investigations linked multistate foodborne illness outbreaks to Fresh Express [bagged salads](#) and [onion](#) varieties used in multiple food products. Together, the outbreaks sickened more than 1,700 people. Wegmans’ suppliers voluntarily [recalled](#) tainted produce linked to two different outbreaks, with additional retailers named in an outbreak of *Salmonella* in peaches.

5. Protein

Protein as a nutrient and its role in human diets



After consumers stockpiled meats at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, demand for protein in the United States has remained constant into the fall months. Research group IRI pointed out: “This year’s everyday demand managed to beat last year’s holiday demand during one of the biggest grilling weekends of

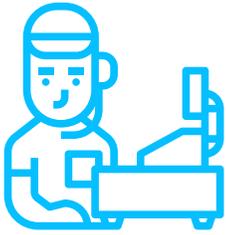
the summer [Labor Day]” ([National Provisioner](#)). The North American Meat Institute [shared](#) a midyear top ten summary of meat, leading with the fact that meat and poultry sales grew nearly 35% over last year and shoppers bought 48% more meat to prepare at home. Beef led the way with 61% of the “fresh meat dollars.”

On September 22, Reuters [summarized](#) the meat export situation. Chinese demand for U.S. pork remained strong as African swine fever has crippled domestic production there. Pork is expected to be key in reaching China’s \$36.5 billion “Phase One” trade deal commitment.

Meanwhile, animal protein faced increased competition from alternative products, particularly on the cell-cultured front. On July 24, FDA and USDA jointly [presented](#) developments in regulation of cell-cultured fish and poultry products. On September 3, food blogger Marion Nestle summarized the latest developments in the segment, including an Australian firm pledging to make “cultured versions of unconventional exotic animals – such as tortoise, yak and lion.” However, the University of Sydney [found](#) that 72% of Generation Z Australians remained uninterested in lab-grown meat.

6. Workforce

Pay, benefits and safety of workers



The workforce, a topic that skyrocketed to the top of our list during the first few months of the coronavirus pandemic, remains a priority concern as all stages of food production depend on the stability of workers. After COVID-19 infections among workers severely hampered

meat processing in March and April, production levels rebounded to 95% of pre-pandemic capacity. In an August New York Times ad, Smithfield Foods [praised](#) its 42,000 essential employees, and took aim at critics. But a month later, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) fined [Smithfield](#) and [JBS](#) for failing to remove hazards. The North American Meat Institute [defended](#) the

meatpackers, noting that OSHA did not issue guidelines until after the dates it cited as violations.

The situation grew more dire for workers in farms and restaurants. Farm Journal [outlined](#) how agriculture is coping with coronavirus complications in operations and labor, touching on the difficulties in securing H-2A immigrant labor visas. PBS Frontline [published](#) a video on July 21 documenting farmworker struggles.

In foodservice, unemployment due to shuttered operations remained the largest labor challenge. At the end of the quarter, the National Restaurant Association (NRA) [reported](#) that restaurant and bar staffing levels were still down 2.3 million jobs from February's peak. And restaurant workers [acquired](#) a new skill: de-escalation training, stemming from new difficulties with customers over mask policies (NRA).

7. Pesticides

Herbicides, fungicides, insecticides and other forms of pest management



Mainstream attention to crop protection largely stems from advocacy groups linking pesticides to finished food products. Consumer Reports [published](#) an article in its September edition that encouraged readers to “stop eating pesticides.” Friends of the Earth

[touted](#) research that found an organic food diet reduced exposure to the herbicide glyphosate.

As in many recent quarters, the bulk of the conversations surrounded glyphosate. Despite EPA analysis that [concluded](#)

the herbicide poses “no risks of concern to human health ... and ... is not a carcinogen,” Bayer AG [renegotiated](#) settlements for 45,000 lawsuits for an alleged association between its glyphosate-based Roundup herbicide and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma (Reuters). On August 26, the National Black Farmers Association [filed](#) a separate lawsuit to have Bayer end sales of the product.

On September 18, the EPA also announced interim approval of the herbicide atrazine. National Corn Growers Association President Kevin Ross [thanked](#) the administration for authorizing a tool used on 60% of U.S. corn acres.

8. Human Health

Diet-related health conditions, including obesity, diabetes and hypertension



On July 15, the U.S. Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee [posted](#) its final scientific report on dietary guidelines. The report is published every five years and suggests the latest thinking in nutritional science. The committee recommended few changes from

2015 but lowered the bar for added sugars from 10% of daily calories to 6%. *Fat Chance* author Robert Lustig, MD, [tweeted](#) support for recommendations that children under 2 years avoid added sugars entirely. Grist [highlighted](#) one topic absent from this year’s report: environmental impact. Modern Farmer’s Dan Nozowitz [explained](#) which industry groups oppose the reports’ recommendations, and why.

A smattering of other human health topics piqued interest throughout the quarter. Nation’s Restaurant News [covered](#)

a September 11 CDC report that found an association between restaurants and COVID-19 infections; the National Restaurant Association [criticized](#) the agency for jumping to conclusions with inadequate data. On September 22, Berkeley, California, [passed](#) an ordinance that bans soda and candy in

checkout areas of stores with more than 2,500 square feet (ABC News). Center for Science in the Public Interest [lauded](#) the move as a “massive win for consumers and public health.”



9. International Trade

Imports and exports of food and agricultural products



International trade fell in the rankings for the third consecutive quarter, reaching its lowest rank since 2017. Part of the decline can be linked to the “Phase One” trade agreement that [requires](#) China to purchase \$36.5 billion of agricultural goods by the end of 2021, partially resolving a trade war the Trump administration

initiated in March 2020. Leaders from the U.S. Soybean Export Council and U.S. Meat Export Federation [praised](#) progress under the deal, but the American Farm Bureau Federation [warned](#) that China was unlikely to uphold its commitments.

Furthermore, the WTO [ruled](#) that the 2018 tariffs on Chinese goods violated international trade rules. After President Trump threatened to withdraw from the organization, a coalition of 61 agricultural groups [petitioned](#) U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer not to do so.

Additionally, on September 1, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative, USDA and Department of Commerce [opened](#) an investigation into the “threat posed by increased foreign imports” of blueberries. Modern Farmer [questioned](#) the merit of the investigations and Bloomberg writer Kim Chipman [framed](#) the move as an appeal to voters in the Southeast.

10. Niche Food Production

Nonconventional production practices and smaller producers/processors



In the wake of COVID-19-related supply chain disruptions, food industry leaders discussed the merits of alternative production and logistics. Civil Eats [profiled](#) the Bay Area Ranchers Cooperative, which aims to ease processing backlogs and reduce carbon

emissions by bringing mobile processing units to member farms. On September 29, Reps. Chellie Pingree (D-Maine) and Jeff Fortenberry (R-Neb.) [introduced](#) a bill to

encourage similar small-scale processing nationwide and prevent bottlenecks of the magnitude seen earlier this year.

Urban farming garnered attention as a means of shortening the length of supply chains. The New York Times [highlighted](#) the transformation of Governor’s Island in New York City from a tourist destination to a working produce farm. Food Tank President Dani Nierenberg [interviewed](#) Acta Non Verba founder Kelly Carlisle about engaging urban youth in farming. Civil Eats [positioned](#) city-based agriculture as a way to provide underserved communities with access to fresher food and another source of income.

Timeline: Important Events This Quarter

While the Top Ten Topics highlight the biggest concerns in food production, the most salient events do not always fall neatly into a category and often bridge several topics. Here we highlight the events that sparked the most conversations.

July 6	Uber buys delivery service Postmates for \$2.65 billion
July 13	FDA releases “Smarter Era of Food Safety Blueprint”
July 15	Dietary Guidelines Advisory Committee publishes scientific recommendations
July 20	Black Lives Matter and Fight for \$15 organize strikes at fast-food chains
Aug. 1	Thomson International recalls onions due to <i>Salmonella</i> contamination
Aug. 7	Walmart partners with The Nature Conservancy to source sustainable beef
Aug. 10	A derecho wreaks havoc across the Midwest
Aug. 27	Amazon opens brick and mortar grocery store, Amazon Fresh
Sept. 1	Walmart announces Walmart+ subscription delivery service
Sept. 10	OSHA fines Smithfield Foods for COVID-19-related worker concerns
Sept. 11	OSHA fines JBS USA for COVID-19-related worker concerns
Sept. 21-25	Food companies issue sustainability commitments as part of Climate Week
Sept. 29	United Nations declares first International Day of Awareness of Food Loss and Waste

Although the pandemic has disrupted many things, it has not stopped the campaigns of President Donald Trump or former Vice President Joe Biden. The Biden campaign has laid out detailed policy plans while the Trump administration has pledged to extend its past efforts. Here we focus on how their agendas will affect key food and agricultural production issues.

	TRUMP	BIDEN
	<p>"I'll tell you, you can go back to Abraham Lincoln and there's no President that's treated the farmers like Trump."</p> <p>– President Donald Trump (White House)</p>	<p>"As president, Biden will ... strengthen our agriculture sector by pursuing a trade policy that works for farmers, supporting beginning farmers, fostering the development of regional food systems, promoting biofuels, and partnering with farmers to achieve net-zero emissions, giving farmers new sources of income in the process."</p> <p>– Biden Campaign</p>
Trade	<p>Used tariffs extensively in a trade war with China, resulting in lower agriculture exports from the United States</p> <p>Signed the "Phase One" trade deal with China to recover ag exports</p> <p>Has threatened to withdraw from the WTO</p>	<p>Will work with allies to pressure China</p> <p>Will reexamine tariffs</p> <p>Will remain in WTO</p>
Workers	<p>Has not increased the minimum wage</p> <p>Has restricted immigration, with exemptions for farmworkers</p>	<p>Will raise federal minimum wage to \$15/hr.</p> <p>Supports unions, including for farmworkers</p> <p>Would provide path to citizenship for immigrant farmworkers</p>
Business	<p>Has focused on deregulation, such as cutting taxes, delisting endangered species and repealing WOTUS</p>	<p>Will use antitrust laws to address consolidation in meatpacking industry</p>
Sustainability	<p>Administration committed to boosting farm production by 40% while lowering environmental footprint by 50% by 2050</p>	<p>Will expand Conservation Stewardship Program</p> <p>Will rely on farmers' ability to sequester carbon in soil as part of a plan to reach net-zero greenhouse gas emissions</p>
Ethanol	<p>Expanded use of waivers that allow oil refiners to blend in less ethanol</p> <p>Lifted limits on E15 blends of gasoline</p>	<p>Will increase ethanol use as part of plan to boost renewable energy sources</p>

ACRONYM KEY:

WTO: World Trade Organization | **WOTUS:** Waters of the United States rule (an update to the Clean Water Act) | **E15:** gasoline blended with 15% ethanol

Looking for more details? Check out the sources below:

American Farm Bureau Federation: [Presidential Candidate Questionnaire](#)

Trump Campaign: [Trade & Foreign Policy, Land and Agriculture](#)

Biden Campaign: [Rural America, Workers and Unions](#)

The Economist: [How would Joe Biden change America's trade policy?](#)

Politico: [Biden won't rule out new tariffs, adviser says](#)

Politico: [Trump's massive payouts to farmers will be hard to pull back](#)

Civil Eats: [Kamala Harris Brings Food Justice to the Democratic Ticket](#)

Civil Eats: [In a Year of Climate Reckoning, Where Does Joe Biden Stand on Climate and Agriculture?](#)

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