



This Week in Food News

By Barry Estabrook

Jim Crow is Alive and Well in California

SB 1121 was hardly a radical-sounding piece of legislation. Among other things, it would have given California's 700,000 farm workers the right to take one day off out of every seven. Hourly paid agricultural employees would have received overtime pay after eight hours per day or 40 hours per week.

But when the bill landed on Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger's desk, he [vetoed](#) it, saying that the new provisions would put farmers out of business.

Had the law passed, California farm laborers would have been the first in the country to receive the right to overtime pay. In order to get his New Deal policies past southern Democrats in the 1930s, Franklin Roosevelt exempted field hands (most of whom were African-American at the time) from protections granted other workers. Those exemptions still stand.

"The governor had a chance to make history," Sen. Dean Florez, the bill's author, told the *San Francisco Chronicle*. "He had a chance to wipe a 70-year-old shame off the books of California. Instead he has decided to side with the shameful."

Invasion of the Superweeds

They are on the march. Once confined to the Deep South, stubborn weeds that have become resistant to glyphosate, the active ingredient in Monsanto's popular Roundup herbicide, have now [spread to at least 22 states](#), according to scientists at the University of Missouri.

The weed killer is commonly used with so-called "Roundup Ready" crops such as corn and soybeans that Monsanto has genetically modified to survive applications of the chemical. Since the 1990s, glyphosate has been the cheapest way for farmers to control weeds. Farmers simply spray it on their GMO crops. There is no need to till the land between plantings. But there can be too much of a (questionably) good thing. Over time, giant ragweed, marestail, and other wild species have naturally evolved resistance to the herbicide, creating new varieties of Roundup Ready weeds. In some areas, farmers have simply abandoned weed-choked fields.

Meanwhile, the tough new weeds continue their march. "The further north you get, the less of a problem it's been so far," Blake Hurst, vice-president of the Missouri Farm Bureau, told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. "Farmers are denying it's going to happen to them. But guess what? It's on the way to your farm."

Open Season in the Gulf—at Last

Hot on the heels of news that BP had at last capped its runaway oil well in the Gulf of Mexico, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Association announced last week that it was reopening one third of the fishing waters that had been off-limits since the fire and blowout in late April.

The newly opened 26,000 square miles lie 190 miles southwest of the well. There has been no oil observed in the area for 30 days and examinations of fish from the area show that potential contaminant levels are "well below levels of concern." Flesh has no off-odors or taste.

This will be good news, particularly for fishermen who pursue snappers and grouper along an underwater area called the West Florida Shelf where their livelihoods suffered greatly under the closure.

Marine Stewardship Council Loses its Luster

Once viewed as setting the gold standard for eco-certification of seafood, the Marine Stewardship Council came under harsh criticism from several major environmental groups after it [gave its blessing](#) to the sockeye salmon fishery of British Columbia's Fraser River.

Certification was granted even after last year's salmon returns to the river collapsed when only 13 percent of the expected 10.5 million spawning salmon entered the river. The Canadian government launched a judicial inquiry, which has yet to report its findings on what caused the failure. Populations of sockeye that breed in two of the Fraser's tributaries are listed as critically endangered.

"There is no way these kinds of endangered salmon should be considered a sustainable choice until the fisheries management system is improved and endangered stocks given a chance to recover," said Vicky Husband, senior advisor with Watershed Watch Salmon Society, one of the groups now calling for consumers to [avoid buying](#) Fraser River sockeye.

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