

Mississippi sees increase in COVID cases in those under 50



Dr. Alan Jones, associate vice chancellor for clinical affairs and COVID-19 clinical response leader at the University of Mississippi Medical School, talks about UMMC’s response to the delta variant of the coronavirus during a news conference at the hospital in Jackson, Miss., Wednesday, Aug. 4, 2021. (Eric Shelton/The Clarion-Ledger via AP)

Hyde-Smith votes to advance FY 2022 Ag appropriations bill

Committee Approves Bill with Supplemental Assistance Linked to 2020 & 2021 Flooding, Other Natural Disasters

WASHINGTON, D.C. — U.S. Senator Cindy Hyde-Smith (R-Miss.) Wednesday, August 4, voted with the Senate Appropriations Committee to advance a funding measure that supports agricultural interests in Mississippi, including supplemental disaster assistance for producers adversely affected by natural disasters in 2020 and 2021.

Hyde-Smith, who serves on the Senate Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, helped develop the FY2022 Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill. The measure, which funds USDA agriculture, rural development, conservation, food safety, and nutrition assistance programs, was approved, 25-5.

“As an agriculture-focused state, Mississippi has a broad interest in this appropriations bill. It would support those federal agricultural and conservation programs that help producers be more efficient and successful in feeding and clothing our nation. The rural development aspects of this bill are also important to ensuring small communities deliver basic services,” Hyde-Smith said.

“This bill also recommends important supplemental disaster assistance for our farmers and ranchers affected by natural disasters in 2020, as well as in 2021. That is a big deal for Mississippi producers, who’ve been left with few good options after successive years of flooding and other disasters,” she said.

The Senate bill recom-

mends \$7.03 billion in supplemental disaster assistance for payments to producers who have suffered losses due to hurricanes, floods, winter storms, and other qualifying natural disasters that occurred in 2020 and 2021. This funding includes \$750 million for livestock producers.

According to damage estimates prepared by American Farm Bureau Federation based on USDA Risk Management Agency data, Hurricanes Zeta, Laura, and other weather events caused more than \$52 million in uncovered crop damages in 2020 in Mississippi. Yazoo Backwater Area flooding in 2020 alone prevented planting on well over 200,000 acres. For 2021, the Mississippi State University Extension Service estimates adverse weather affected more than 1.4 million acres across 39 Mississippi counties, resulting in more than \$839 million in damages.

Hyde-Smith also noted \$8.4 million included within USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) Watershed and Flood Prevention Operations funding specifically to support work to reduce flooding, erosion, and sediment damages in various authorized watersheds within Mississippi.

“The additional NRCS funding for Mississippi would help correct watershed deterioration caused by recent storms and flooding, particularly the unprecedented rainfall and flooding that affected the northern part of the state in early June. This damage adversely affects

By Leah Willingham

Jackson, Miss. (AP) — Health care systems across Mississippi are seeing a surge of coronavirus cases and hospitalizations in people under 50, a shift from earlier in the pandemic when the virus was predominately affecting older adults. A hospital official said there were only six available ICU beds in the entire state.

“Most of the people that are unvaccinated in Mississippi are under 50, so that’s the population that we’re seeing,” said Dr. Alan Jones, Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical Affairs at the University of Mississippi Medical Center. “It’s attacking the vulnerable and the vulnerable are the unvaccinated.”

In response to the surge,

agriculture production and conservation efforts in our state,” Hyde-Smith said.

Among the items of interest to Mississippi in the committee-passed measure:

- Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD) – Increased funding for CWD research and development, in addition to added funding for state CWD monitoring activities.
- Cattle Contract Library – Funding for the Agricultural Marketing Service (AMS) to establish a cattle contract library and funding for AMS enforcement of the Packers and Stockyard Act.
- Warmwater Aquaculture Research – Funding for the U.S. Agricultural Research Services (ARS) at Stoneville to continue warmwater research to advance technologies that improve the efficiency, profitability and sustainability of aquaculture production.
- Catfish Inspections – Language directing the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service to continue the catfish inspection program and to ensure foreign imports meet the U.S. food safety standards.

• ARS Extramural Research – Continues funding for ARS research projects involving Mississippi State University, the University of Mississippi, and other state institutions.

• Institute of Child Nutrition – Increased funding for the Institute of Child Nutrition at the University of Mississippi.

In addition to the Agriculture Appropriations measure, the Appropriations Committee on Wednesday also approved the FY2022 Energy and Water Development Appropriations Bill and the FY2022 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Bill.

Mississippi State University will be requiring masks indoors for the fall 2021 semester, the school announced in a news release Wednesday.

Officials at Mississippi’s only level-one trauma center and teaching hospital said Wednesday that 90% of the new cases and hospitalizations they are seeing are among unvaccinated people.

The Mississippi State Department of Health reported 2,821 new cases of coronavirus in a single day Wednesday, numbers not seen in the state since the last surge of the virus over the winter. Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs Dr. LouAnn Woodward said during the last major surge, the vaccine was not yet available.

Woodward said it’s exhausting for medical officials to know there’s a tool available now that can be used to help fight the virus and people are refusing it.

“It is almost impossible to put into words the frustration that we all feel, the disappointment that here we are again and honestly, some low level of anger,” said Woodward, who is also dean of the School of Medicine. “There are a lot of people in health care right now that feel pretty mad about this situation.”

More than 1,000 people were hospitalized with coronavirus in Mississippi on Wednesday. University of Mississippi Medical Center Chief Administrative Officer Dr. Jonathan Wilson said there were only six available ICU beds in the entire state.

There have been days in the past few weeks when there were as many as 60 people waiting for beds at the medical center, Woodward said.

“There are moments when we’re holding what I would say is a hospital’s worth of patients in the emergency department, in the recovery room and other places like that are waiting for a bed,” said Woodward. “That just puts a strain on the entire system.”

At the University of Mis-

issippi Medical Center, the surge in virus cases has been complicated by an ongoing staffing shortage. Jones said there are currently hundreds of positions open at the hospital. There are close to 30 beds that aren’t being used because there are not enough employees to care for the patients, he said.

“I think I can safely say that other health systems around us and the city and the state are at a breaking point,” he said.

Jones said there were 94 people hospitalized with coronavirus Wednesday at the medical center, with 13 of those cases being children.

Auditor says state may be paying out millions in fraudulent Medicaid benefits



Mississippi Today by Will Stribling

As part of its Single Audit Report for the 2020 fiscal year, the Mississippi auditor’s office sampled 180 Medicaid beneficiaries and found that nine of them were ineligible due to the high income reported on their state tax returns.

On average, those nine reported income levels \$10,727 above the threshold for Medicaid enrollment.

In addition to the nine individuals flagged in the sample, two people who own multi-million dollar homes and declared high incomes on their tax returns, despite receiving Medicaid benefits, had already been flagged as potential fraud cases to investigate.

Under current state law, the Mississippi Division of Medicaid does not have the legal authority to obtain state income tax returns to compare them with the income declared by a person applying for Medicaid benefits. State Auditor Shad White is now calling on Gov. Tate Reeves and the Legislature to grant this authority so that potential fraud can be prevented on the front end.

“I stand ready to work with Medicaid’s leadership to argue to lawmakers that they should have this tool in their toolbox,” White said in a press release. “It could stop ineligible applicants from being put on the program in the first place. We know this tool would be useful because Medicaid’s internal policies state they should ask an applicant for their return, but without the authority to get the return and a requirement to use it, the state is potentially handing out millions to ineligible people.”

In a statement, the Mississippi Division of Medicaid (DOM) said it does not agree that the use of state tax returns would help root out fraud, as the tax information used by the auditor’s office in this case is from more than a year before the person applied for Medicaid. DOM is required to base eligibility on current income and noted that “financial information that far out of date may not accurately reflect the current circumstances of applicants.”

In June 2019, the most recent month for which figures are available, 673,247 Mississippians were enrolled in Medicaid.

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Please include all pertinent details, dates, location, name of the event or occasion, all associated people, organizations or groups, reason for event or occasion and NAMES OF ALL PEOPLE PICTURED IN ANY PHOTOGRAPH.

We look forward to hearing from you!

-Holmes County Herald Staff