

NEWS IN BRIEF

California panel: Tests find no unapproved rice

The California Rice Commission said Wednesday that LLRICE601, an unapproved, genetically engineered long-grain rice, is not present in any of the rice developed by the California Rice Experiment Station.

Samples of 24 varieties of seed were analyzed by BioDiagnosics Inc. at the request of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and in coordination with Bayer CropScience, the company that developed LLRICE601.

Trace amounts of LL-RICE601 were found in an export shipment from Stuttgart-based Riceland Foods Inc. Since the announcement by the USDA on Aug. 18 about the discovery, several Asian nations have banned imports of U.S. rice, and the European Union now requires testing and certification of such shipments.

Riceland and Bayer CropScience face lawsuits in Arkansas over the issue.

The experimental rice has never been used or tested at the California station, and no field trials of LLRICE601 ever took place in the state, the California Rice Commission said.

Attorney general sues 3 more payday lenders

Attorney General Mike Beebe has sued three more Internet rebate payday lenders, bringing to seven the number of lawsuits filed this year against such operations.

The lawsuits filed Wednesday were against Conway Cash.net, Money.net of Texarkana, and Cash Today.net of Texarkana and Cash Now.net of Ashdown.

Dwight Blake and Dialing4Dollars.net of Collierville, Tenn., are named as defendants in all seven lawsuits. Elaine Blake, Phyllis Blake and Robert Blake are named in all of the suits except the one against Cash Today.net and Cash Now.net. Dwight Blake operates Dialing4Dollars.net.

Earlier, Beebe's office sued Money In A Flash.net, Magnolia Money.Net, Jonesboro Money Online.net and Cressett Cash.net.

The businesses sued on Wednesday charged "unconscionable" annual percentage rates from 240 percent to 520 percent on loans from \$100 to \$300, the lawsuits said.

Arkansas 20 loses 1.14 on sluggish trading day

The Arkansas 20, a price-weighted index that tracks public companies based in the state, fell 1.14 to 20737 Thursday.

"U.S. equities finished slightly lower in a listless pre-holiday trading session," said Evan Olsen, head of equity trading for Stephens Inc. in Little Rock. "The Arkansas 20 was mixed with nine stocks closing down, nine higher and two unchanged."

One of Arkansas' newest public companies, Home BancShares, climbed 0.7 percent, Olsen said.

P.A.M. Transportation had the greatest fall, declining 6.5 percent.

The index, developed by Bloomberg News and the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, has a base value of 100 as of Dec. 30, 1997.

THE ARKANSAS 20

Acxiom Corp.	24.29	-0.15
AERT	2.85	+0.06
Altel Corp.	54.21	+0.02
America's Car-Mart Inc.	15.78	-0.73
Arkansas Best Corp.	44.15	-0.44
Baldor Electric	29.61	-0.19
Bank of the Ozarks	31.92	-0.50
Deltic Timber Corp.	47.43	+0.13
Dillard's Inc.	31.18	-0.41
First Fed Bancshares	22.85	Uchg
Home BancShares	21.15	+0.15
JB Hunt Transport	19.65	Uchg
Murphy Oil Corp.	48.91	+0.44
PAM Transportation	24.91	-1.73
Pocahontas Bancorp.	16.00	+0.10
Simmons First Nil.	28.82	-0.09
Tyson Foods	14.73	-0.03
USA Truck	16.67	+0.09
Wal-Mart Stores	44.72	+0.10
Windstream	13.20	+0.13

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AP/MARK LENNIHAN

Customers at a Costco store in Norwalk, Conn., look at a display of plasma screen television sets last month.

Wal-Mart sales grow 12.5%

Giant retailer thrives in weeks leading up to school starts

BY DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

School supplies and college dorm basics drove sales increases for August, Wal-Mart Stores Inc. reported Thursday.

The Bentonville-based retailer reported companywide sales of \$25.97 billion for the four weeks that ended Aug. 25, an increase of 12.5 percent over sales of \$23.07 billion for the same period in 2005.

Same-store sales rose 2.7 percent for the same period, exceeding Wall Street analysts' expected 2.5 percent rise as surveyed by Thomson Financial. The term "same-store sales" refers to stores open longer than a year.

Little Rock-based Dillard's Inc. saw same-store sales decline

1 percent for most of August, with \$557.3 million in revenue nationwide over four weeks that ended Saturday. Analysts polled by Thomson Financial expected a 0.7 percent increase. Sales for the period declined 2 percent, Dillard's noted in a news release Thursday.

"We saw sales momentum for the August period build throughout the month. Our customers focused spending on food, consumables and items for back to school," Tom Schoewe, Wal-Mart's executive vice president and chief financial officer, said in a statement.

Continuing hot temperatures in August also helped drive sales of fans and air conditioners, Schoewe said.

Patrice Duker, research analyst for the International Council of Shopping Centers, said the Wal-Mart sales report produced no surprises.

"Overall the industry rose 2.9 percent, so they were certainly in line with the whole," Duker said Thursday.

She said consumers have not drastically changed their shopping patterns from the first of the year.

"Consumers haven't cut back. We're predicting a 3.7 percent increase in sales for the year, and that's pretty healthy growth. But since June we've seen some slowing in the reported increases," she said.

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Top retailers

Percentage change of major retailers' sales for the 52 weeks ended Aug. 31:

TJX Cos.	+4.0%	↑
Federated Department Stores Inc.	+3.8%	↑
Saks Inc.	+3.3%	↑
Target Corp.	+2.8%	↑
Wal-Mart Stores Inc.	+2.7%	↑
J.C. Penney Co. Inc.	-0.5%	↓
Dillard's Inc.	-1.0%	↓
Gap Inc.	-7.0%	↓

NOTE: Sales include those from stores open at least a year, known as same-store sales. Reporting periods vary slightly and not all retailers have the same fiscal year.

AP

Johanns pushing farm-law changes

Agriculture chief cites global trade

BY ALEX DANIELS
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

WASHINGTON — The Bush administration will push to scrap much of existing federal farm policy when debate on the next farm bill begins in earnest next year, U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns told an audience of free-trade advocates Thursday.

While he did not offer specifics, Johanns said the administration's proposals would be based largely on the U.S. stance at World Trade Organization talks — drastic reductions in federal payments to farmers who produce commodity crops such as corn, cotton, rice, wheat and soy.

"We owe it to our farmers and ranchers to do more than simply rubber-stamp the farm policies of the past," Johanns said.

Despite the U.S. offer to reduce farm payments, the trade talks, which would have set rules on an array of agricultural products and services, were suspended in July and are now "on life support," Johanns said.

In an interview, Arkansas' Sen. Blanche Lincoln said reducing farm payments would "give our hand away completely" at the negotiating table. Lincoln, a Democrat who sits on the Senate Agriculture Nutrition and Forestry Committee and the Finance Committee, which deals with trade matters, has sponsored a bill that would maintain current farm policy.

Arkansas' Rep. Marion Berry wants to up the ante. He favors raising crop payments.

While Johanns and other free-trade advocates favor lowering farm subsidies to avoid potential litigation with other World Trade Organization members, Berry, who like Lincoln is a Democrat, said cutting farm payments would weaken

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BLOOMBERG NEWS/MARK ELIAS

Patricia Romeo, an employee of an Aston Martin dealership in Palm Beach, Fla., does a final check Thursday on a Vanquish S coupe, which retails for \$268,000.

Ford explores possibly shedding Aston Martin sports car brand

BY TOM KRISHER
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

DETROIT — Ford Motor Co. said Thursday that it is exploring the possible sale of all or part of its iconic Aston Martin sports car brand as the automaker works to free up cash to pay for its North American turnaround plan.

British-based Aston Martin is best known for its cars' appearances in James Bond movies and makes about 5,000 cars a year. They cost upwards of \$100,000 each.

Ford said no decisions have been made about its other luxury car brands which include Jaguar, Land Rover and Volvo.

"As part of our ongoing strategic review, we have determined that Aston Martin may

be an attractive opportunity to raise capital and generate value," Bill Ford, the automaker's chairman and chief executive, said in a statement.

He said the Aston Martin's dealer network, design and size are different from other Ford brands and the brand is the most logical choice for possible sale.

He said no decisions have been made about its other Premier Automotive Group brands.

"We continue to be encouraged by Jaguar's progress and by the strength and consumer appeal of the Jaguar, Land Rover and Volvo product lineups," he said.

But Ford spokesman Tom Hoyt said that doesn't mean the company won't sell the brands.

"We're still taking a look at all aspects of the business, as Bill Ford has said. Everything's on the table," Hoyt said.

Ford shares rose 10 cents to close at \$8.37 on the New York Stock Exchange.

Aston Martin has its headquarters, research and production facilities in Gaydon, England. Last month the company celebrated production of its 30,000th car.

Ford bought 75 percent of the company in 1987 and acquired full ownership in 1994, Hoyt said. In 1992, he said, the company made only 46 vehicles but now makes about 5,000 cars a year.

He declined to reveal a potential sales price.
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Proposed cable law attracts criticism and support in LR

BY BILL W. HORNADAY
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

Backers of a federal bill to expand cable TV competition got a cool reception from some consumer advocates Thursday, who said the proposed law — despite its intent — falls short in some areas and goes too far in others.

Consumers for Cable Choice and the League of United Latin American Citizens used a lunch briefing at the state Capitol to outline the aim of the Communications Opportunity Promotion and Enhancement Act of 2006.

The bill has been approved by House and Senate committees and awaits a Senate floor vote. It would allow the national franchising of cable competitors instead of individual agreements

for more than 33,000 towns, cities and other local entities. Consumers for Cable Choice President Bob Johnson said.

Opponents of the bill include major telecom providers such as AT&T and Comcast, along with Internet information providers such as eBay and Google that are aligning their services with such carriers, he said.

Proponents include smaller rural telecom cooperatives with fewer resources to compete with their larger rivals, along with groups such as LULAC and rural groups such as the National Farmers Union.

Municipalities would retain control over rights of way and collect franchise fees, while limiting regulatory and deposit fees for consumers, he said.

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BP aims to get idle pipeline up, running soon at Prudhoe Bay

BY H. JOSEF HEBERT
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PRUDHOE BAY, Alaska — BP officials are increasingly optimistic that Prudhoe Bay oil production can be returned to normal levels earlier than expected, believing a portion of the pipeline idled by corrosion concerns may be usable at least temporarily and that other sections can be bypassed.

The flow of oil from Prudhoe Bay has been cut in half to 200,000 barrels a day as BP prepares to replace 16 miles of pipeline after discovering extensive internal corrosion that

resulted in spills in March and early August.

Oil deliveries resumed earlier in August through the western half of the pipeline system by bypassing the damaged sections of pipe. But the eastern section remains idled as BP conducts extensive tests to determine whether at least some of that pipe can be used.

"The idea that there was widespread corrosion simply was not correct," David Peattie, London-based BP PLC's vice president for exploration and production told The Associated Press.
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