



Peterson slams GOP farm bill

REP. COLLIN PETERSON of Minnesota may be the most reluctant partisan in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Peterson was a leader of the Blue Dog Democrats when there were enough rural Democrats from conservative areas to matter. He is a rock musician and a hunter. Alternating between chairman and ranking member of the House Agriculture Committee, he has negotiated the content of several farm bills with a series of Republicans.

But on Tuesday, Peterson signaled to the North American Agricultural Journalists that he has had enough of House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway's plans to make changes to the food-stamp program in the 2018 farm bill.

Although Conaway has not released his bill, he and his staff have told reporters that he wants to transform food stamps—formally the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—so that as many beneficiaries as possible have to work or be in training programs to find jobs. That won't affect most SNAP participants because the majority of the 40 million-plus people who get benefits are children, the elderly, or disabled.

The Conaway proposal would make it harder to qualify for SNAP benefits and use the savings to put more money into job training in the states and require the states to offer training slots.

But Peterson maintains that the job-training proposal isn't on a big enough scale to work. For people who believe that the states will live up to the requirement that they offer a job-training slot to anyone who qualifies, Peterson said, "I've got oceanside land in Phoenix to sell you.

"I will guarantee you the federal government cannot do this without screwing it up," he said. "The money being put into work training is a sham. Basically it is designed to be a hassle factor so that people will drop out of a program."

Conaway has said that no one will be pushed off SNAP, but Peterson said that is essentially "fake news." People will "self-select" off because no one is going to sit in a classroom for 80 hours a month to get \$100 in benefits, Peterson said.

The changes, he said, will result in taking \$20 billion away from 3 to 5 million beneficiaries and "spending it on bureaucracy."

The Conaway proposal, Peterson said, "is ideology run amok."

Conaway may be under orders from House Speaker Paul Ryan not to negotiate changes to the proposal because Republicans want the public to have the "perception" they are doing something about welfare programs, he said.

The Conaway farm-bill proposal is unlikely to become law because it would never be acceptable to the Senate, Peterson said, but he worries that bringing it to the floor could have negative effects on the farm programs that members from urban and suburban districts have supported because the bill also includes SNAP benefits.

The Republican-only proposal, he said, could result in floor amendments that would damage the sugar program, cut crop-insurance coverage, and impose payment limits on farm subsidies. Even if the bill doesn't pass the House this year, it would be easier for members to vote for those amendments if a more serious bill comes up next year.

Peterson said Republicans who want to make changes to

SNAP but maintain the farm program without cuts seem to believe that he can keep urban and suburban Democrats "in line" to vote for the farm subsidies. But if those Democrats are "ticked off" about SNAP, they will not follow his admonitions, he said.

Peterson said he has never been "excited" about Conaway's bill, because it doesn't provide any new money for farmers in a period of low commodity prices, but that until now he has "remained quiet" because he was trying to work on a bipartisan bill.

Now seemingly freed by the SNAP dispute, Peterson said he has directed his staff to work with the Congressional Budget Office to figure how much it would cost to raise target prices under the Price Loss Coverage program by 10 percent.

That idea runs counter to Peterson's usual fiscal conservatism, but noting the recent budget-busting tax bill and omnibus appropriations bill, he said, "We are in an era in which paying for stuff is not important."

Asked if he would prefer an extension of the 2014 farm bill and rewriting the bill in 2019 when he might chair the committee, Peterson would say only that "unless something breaks on this food-stamp stuff I think the likelihood is going to be an extension."

If a Republican-only bill somehow gets through the House and goes to conference with a bipartisan bill written by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts and ranking member Debbie Stabenow, Peterson said, "I will be conferring on behalf of the Senate. It will be three against one." □



House Agriculture ranking member Collin Peterson

Contributing Editor Jerry Hagstrom is the founder and executive editor of The Hagstrom Report, which may be found at www.HagstromReport.com.