



Farm-bill fight gets messier

ONE WEEK after House Agriculture Committee Republicans passed a farm bill, all is superficially quiet on this legislative front. But behind the scenes, the situation is messy and getting messier.

After the committee passed the bill on a party-line 26-20 vote last Wednesday, Chairman Mike Conaway said he wants to bring it to the House floor as early as possible in May. A Conaway spokeswoman said Tuesday that the Texas Republican is working with the House leadership but won't bring the bill to the floor until he is "confident" it will pass.

Conaway told reporters that he is open to both Republicans and Democrats making up his majority. But Democratic members are so opposed to the work requirements that the bill would impose on food-stamp beneficiaries that it's hard to imagine any of them voting for it. House Agriculture ranking member Collin Peterson—who this week was declared by The Lugar Center, led by former Sen. Richard Lugar, and the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University to have been the most bipartisan member of the House in 2017—is vigorously opposed to the nutrition title. The farm-program section of the bill is the same as when Peterson was negotiating with the Republicans, and Conaway has called it bipartisan. But Peterson has declared that, with farm incomes low and the Trump administration's trade policies resulting in retaliatory tariffs on U.S. farm products, the farm-program section won't solve producers' problems.

Conaway's big challenge is to convince the most conservative Republicans to support the bill. Conservative leaders have mixed feelings. Some are pleased with the stricter rules for food stamps—formally the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program—while others say the changes don't go far enough. But conservatives have been critics of farm subsidies for years, and this bill doesn't reduce that spending.

After the committee passed the bill, Speaker Paul Ryan praised it as part of the GOP agenda of moving people into work. It's possible that Ryan and Conaway can twist enough Republican arms to vote for the bill, but they also have to face the fact that conservatives are likely to offer amendments to change the sugar program, reduce crop-insurance benefits, and impose payment limitations for farm subsidies. If those amendments pass, it will be hard to get members from rural areas to continue to support the bill. Peterson, who has in the past delivered the votes of urban and suburban members and minorities to support the farm program even though they have no farmers in their districts,

has said that he can't guarantee those votes if Republicans insist on their onerous work requirements.

Rep. David Scott of Georgia gave a taste of the opposition that the bill could face with minorities when he said at the markup that the nutrition title's work requirements played into the stereotype that African-American men don't work even though they have worked since the days of slavery. The bill, Scott said, is "hurtful, deceitful, it is un-American, and it is filled with racial vicissitude."

If the bill passes the House, then there would be the question of a Senate bill and a conference. Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts said repeatedly at a hearing with Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue on Tuesday that the Senate bill will be bipartisan.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar of Minnesota urged Perdue to "use your cheery influence" to get the House to drop some of the food-stamp provisions. But the Trump administration is already trying to impose stricter work requirements on food-stamp beneficiaries, and that raises another issue: Neither Perdue nor the White House has said how the administration views the farm bill, other than offering a list of feel-good "principles" to which no one could object.

President Trump's trade policies will undoubtedly play a role in the future of the bill. Perdue has proposed making payments to farmers hurt by trade retaliation, but last week Peterson wrote Trump, Perdue, and U.S. Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer that the administration should instead support raising reference prices that trigger farm payments.

On Tuesday, Roberts told reporters that it would be better to put the possible \$15 billion per year in trade-assistance payments into the farm bill. He noted that products affected by tariffs would include raisins, almonds, and whiskey.

"What are we going to do—have whiskey payments?" Roberts asked, as if anticipating the public outcry.

Neither Peterson nor Roberts addressed the fact that the Agriculture Department could get that money using its authorities to help farmers in distress, and that Congress would have to add more money to the farm bill.

Peterson has already said he would support the bipartisan Senate bill, and now the Peterson-Roberts relationship seems to be growing closer. □



House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway

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