

Jerry Hagstrom



Hurdles for a farm-bill deal

THE FARM BILL THAT the Senate Agriculture Committee will consider Wednesday is refreshingly dull compared to the bill that passed the House Agriculture Committee with only Republican votes and so far has failed to win passage on the House floor.

But the utter conventionality of the Senate bill also shows how difficult it would be for the two chambers to write a conference report that would be acceptable to both, especially before the November election.

The Senate bill is titled “The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018,” and that’s exactly what it does: tinker with the farm programs in the 2014 farm bill and add a few provisions to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program to tighten up enforcement, without the House bill’s work requirements and eligibility restrictions that antihunger groups and Democrats detest.

The Senate bill is the bipartisan product of Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts and ranking member Debbie Stabenow. It is designed to be able to get the 60 votes needed to end debate on the Senate floor. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said he wants to bring the bill up soon and finish it before the Senate leaves on June 29 for the July 4 recess. Minority Leader Chuck Schumer has said he will not urge his caucus to slow down the process.

The committee markup should go smoothly. Roberts has put out the word that he doesn’t want any poison-pill amendments that could scuttle his and Stabenow’s carefully crafted bipartisan approach, but it’s impossible, of course, for him to control action on the Senate floor.

Roberts might still have to deal with public concern about big payments to big farmers. The last few farm bills have contained provisions to rein in subsidy payments to the biggest farmers, although they have not proven very effective. The only provision in that direction in this year’s bill is to lower the adjusted gross income level that qualifies farmers to get subsidies, from \$900,000 to \$700,000.

Sen. Chuck Grassley of Iowa has said he will offer amendments to limit subsidies and to tighten up on the definition of an “actively engaged” farmer so that farmland heirs who claim to be part of a farm’s management would have a harder time claiming subsidies. The House bill contains provisions to make it easier for big farmers to get even more subsidies.

Roberts will probably face a floor battle over sugar, and perhaps one in committee or on the floor over the benefit

levels of the basic commodity programs: Price Loss Coverage and Agriculture Risk Coverage. Sens. John Thune of South Dakota and Sherrod Brown of Ohio asked for improvements to the ARC program that Midwesterners favor, but Roberts agreed to only a few changes, on the grounds that farmers in other parts of the country would feel disfavored.

If the Senate approves the bill in June and House Republicans settle their dispute over immigration and hold a revote, the two bills could move to conference this summer.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway is playing nice so far.

“I congratulate Chairman Roberts on the introduction of the Senate farm bill and commend him and his team for all of their hard work,” Conaway wrote in an email. “I look forward to advancing our respective bills through the House and Senate and working together in conference to craft a strong farm bill.”

Conaway has said he realizes that the conference measure will have to be a compromise. House Agriculture ranking member Collin Peterson has said he will largely support the Senate bill. Roberts and Stabenow, he said, “put a bill together that avoids poison pills, stays away from ideology on

SNAP, and most importantly, should be able to get the votes to pass their chamber.” The House Republican bill, he said, “doesn’t stack up to the bipartisan proposal that our Senate colleagues have put together, so we should come back to the drawing board and match their effort.”

Getting the House to approve a compromise conference report may prove difficult, especially before the election, since retiring House Speaker Paul Ryan, who failed to get a broad welfare-reform bill, is believed to want the SNAP provisions to be part of his legacy.

If Congress doesn’t pass a farm bill by Sept. 30, it will need to pass an extension of the 2014 farm bill so that permanent but antiquated laws from the 1930s and ‘40s don’t go into effect.

The best bet for passing a farm bill this year may be in the lame-duck session, especially if Democrats win control of the House in November’s elections. Then the House Republicans might decide to take what they can get while they are still in the majority. □



Sens. Debbie Stabenow and Pat Roberts

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