

## Jerry Hagstrom



## Farm-bill deal slipping to fall

WILL THE FARM-BILL conference drag on for months or could it be finished by July 27, when the House is scheduled to leave until after Labor Day?

Lobbyists have long thought that the House and Senate would not be able to reach agreement on the farm bill until fall. That's because the two versions have such different provisions governing the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The House bill imposes stiffer working requirements on SNAP beneficiaries and tightens up on eligibility. The Senate bill makes less dramatic changes.

But now the idea is circulating that President Trump and the Republicans will want to turn the conference report into a five-year law quickly to show they can do something for agriculture before the House leaves town. Farmers and ranchers need courting, the theory goes, because they are upset about tariffs on U.S. farm products that other countries have imposed in retaliation for the Trump administration's tariffs on steel and aluminum.

The basis for a quick conference dominated by the Senate bill is the strong 86-11 vote that the bill got in the upper chamber. The House bill squeaked through on a 213-211 vote, with only Republicans supporting it. Lobbyists also note that the Office of Management and Budget didn't threaten a veto of the Senate bill in its statement of administration policy.

The OMB did say in the statement that the Senate bill "misses key opportunities to reform the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Most notably, the bill does not strengthen work requirements for able-bodied working age adults. The bill also fails to close eligibility loopholes and target benefits to the neediest households as proposed in the President's Budgets for FY 2018 and FY 2019. It also fails to better align SNAP Employment and Training with other Federal workforce programs."

But rather than concluding with strong language, the statement ends, "The Administration looks forward to working with the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee to address these and other issues with the farm bill as the process moves forward."

Yet so far, prospects for finishing the conference report in three weeks don't look great. A spokeswoman for Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts, who will chair the conference, said, "Chairman Roberts looks forward to working with his House and Senate counterparts to provide certainty and predictability for America's farmers, ranchers, and other stakeholders as soon as possible. This work includes identifying common ground and working through

differences in the weeks ahead. It takes time to get it right."

A spokeswoman for House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway said, "At this time, staff are working through the legislation and we hope to begin the formal conference as soon as possible." On Monday, Conaway signaled that he would fight for the House SNAP provisions by sending reporters a *Wall Street Journal* editorial headlined, "A Food Fight Worth Having."

Neither Roberts nor Conaway has talked about the schedule for the conference, but House Agriculture ranking member Collin Peterson outlined in a radio interview the steps that bear watching in the coming days: each chamber agreeing to go to conference, the appointment of conferees, and an initial public meeting at which conferees give speeches.

Peterson, who is expected to side with the Senate on at least the SNAP provisions, said he could deliver a lot of Democratic votes for the report if they find the nutrition title acceptable. And, he added, Democratic votes will be needed to get the conference report over the finish line in the House.

Besides SNAP, there are differences over commodity subsidies, conservation programs, and rural development.

The Senate bill also raised some money for other programs by reducing the interest rate that the government pays on funds

held in escrow for rural electric cooperatives from 5 percent to market levels. Senate aides have said the co-ops have enjoyed a "cushion of comfort." The National Rural Electric Cooperative Association has called the changes "unreasonable" and "unacceptable" and called on lawmakers "to implement significant changes in conference as they work to develop a farm bill that can be supported by our members and the 42 million Americans they represent."

In the past, conference committees have worked out all these differences, even on SNAP. Whether Congress feels compelled to move quickly on the farm-bill conference probably depends on how farmers and ranchers express themselves in the coming days on the trade conflicts.

Senate Republicans are said to want to stay in session in August to keep Democrats from campaigning. But if farmers and ranchers think that nothing's been done to relieve their trade pain, the campaign trail in rural America may not be comfortable for Republicans. □



House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway

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