



What's next for the farm bill

IT'S NOW CLEAR that Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Michael Conaway will not be able to live up to their promises to pass a new farm bill before the 2014 law expires Sunday.

That might be considered a failure of Republican leadership, but Congress has failed so often to pass a five-year bill on time that it's no big deal. The major farm and nutrition programs will still function, at least until December, although some smaller programs will lose their authorization Sunday. Now the question is whether Congress will finish the bill before the election or during a lame-duck session, or if it will have to start over next year, when Democrats appear likely to be in charge of the House and maybe the Senate.

Most bets are on finishing the bill in the lame-duck session after the Nov. 6 election, but House Agriculture Committee ranking member Collin Peterson said in radio interviews late last week that he believes Congress can finish the bill in October because the House and Senate will be in session part of the month. That plan could go awry, however, if House leaders follow through on a proposal to stop working at the end of this week, canceling next month's sessions.

Peterson based his optimism on a proposal that Conaway apparently put on the table last week that included a softening of his position on changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

The House-passed farm bill included increased work requirements for SNAP beneficiaries and other restrictions on SNAP eligibility. House Democrats refused to support the bill because of the provisions. The Senate-passed bill maintained existing work requirements and included some stricter eligibility enforcement provisions, but nothing close to the House rules that social-welfare advocates said would cause hungry people to go without food.

Peterson said Conaway's latest offer is based on eliminating or reducing the waivers that allow states to avoid the work requirements and other rules in the current law on the grounds of high unemployment. Peterson noted that even the Trump administration has granted waivers to the states.

Conaway has not described his offer publicly, but a House Agriculture Committee Republican aide pointed out that there are "42 different provisions in which the House touched SNAP, and work requirements are just one piece of the puzzle."

Aides to Conaway, Peterson, Roberts, and Senate Agriculture Committee ranking member Debbie Stabenow have

said recently that the nutrition title is not the only thing holding up the legislation. Roberts has said issues surrounding the two basic subsidy programs in the commodity title have been settled. Peterson said other proposals in the title would cost a lot of money, but he declined to describe them.

All four leaders seem to be united behind the idea that an extension of the current law would be a bad idea. "We are not talking about an extension here; we are still trying to get this done," Peterson told the Red River Farm Network.

Conaway said in an email, "We still have an opportunity to get this done. It all boils down to whether there is a political will to make those tough choices. I'm not ready to talk about an extension yet, and anybody who's talking

about it maybe are signaling they've given up."

A spokeswoman for Roberts said, "It's premature to talk about an extension right now. Negotiations are ongoing. The Ag chairmen and ranking members are close to reaching agreement. Members and staff continue to meet often and regularly. Chairman Roberts remains committed to getting a farm bill done quickly."

Stabenow said in an email, "While the Senate was able to reach a historic bipartisan agreement earlier this year, the conference committee is continuing to work

through a number of differences within the bill. I remain committed to finalizing a farm bill as soon as possible that will support our farmers, families, and rural communities."

Peterson said that if Stabenow and Roberts agree to a deal on SNAP, he can deliver enough Democratic votes so that Conaway would not have to depend on the Freedom Caucus to pass the bill.

But SNAP could still be an issue. While key farm and conservation groups have called for passage of the bill as soon as possible, nutrition organizations say their No. 1 priority is rejecting the House SNAP provisions. If Democrats win majorities in the House and Senate, the pressure to reject any restrictions on SNAP would intensify. That might mean settling for an extension and leaving the bill until the next Congress, where the entire process would have to start over.

But the strongest sign that a deal is close came when Peterson told the lobbyists to stay away. "I think everybody just needs to relax," Peterson said on the radio. "We don't need any more advice. We need to be left to work this thing out." □



Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Pat Roberts

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