

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

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Farm bill a bipartisan win

THE FARM-BILL CONFERENCE REPORT, which passed the Senate on Tuesday and is likely to pass the House this week, is a marvel of bipartisan, bicameral compromise in one of the most difficult, divided periods in American political life.

The Agricultural Improvement Act of 2018 is perhaps the dullest farm bill since modern farm legislation began in the 1930s. That reflects how farmers were largely happy with the structure of the safety-net programs in the 2014 farm bill and how Democrats refused to accept House conservatives' attempt to impose stiffer work requirements that would make it harder for low-income people to qualify for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

Environmentalists and Senate Democrats also insisted that Trump administration-backed provisions in the House bill to allow exemptions from environmental laws for removal of timber from the forest floor and thinning of forests be softened.

In a sign that the White House was consulted on the bill before it was finalized, Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue has already said he will "encourage" President Trump to sign it.

"While we would have liked to see more progress on work requirements for SNAP recipients and forest-management reforms, the conference agreement does include several helpful provisions and we will continue to build upon these through our authorities," Perdue added.

But perhaps the most impressive achievement is that the House and Senate agriculture committees, largely thanks to their staffs, managed to make producer-pleasing tweaks to farm programs while staying within the amount that the Congressional Budget Office said the 2014 farm bill would cost if it were extended for 10 years—roughly \$867 billion.

Most of those tweaks are so technical that they are of interest only to the people who will benefit from them. But House Agriculture Committee ranking member Collin Peterson said provisions to manage dairy-price risk and encourage milk consumption are the biggest improvements in the entire bill. The bill also removes hemp's classification as a drug and provides incentives for farmers to grow it. The matter was of such importance to Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's Kentucky farmers that he signed the conference report with a hemp pen.

Major farm groups have already praised the bill and called on Congress to pass it quickly so Trump can sign it. But even more impressive are the positive statements from nutrition advocates and representatives of smaller farmers, the organic-food industry, and animal advocates.

The liberal Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Food Research & Action Center praised the bill for rejecting the House SNAP provisions. The American Heart Association said the bill "will ensure more than 45 million eligible people and their families who are struggling through underemployment and low or stagnant wages" will continue to get SNAP benefits, and noted it will help low-income families buy more fruits and vegetables and improve their nutrition.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which represents smaller, environmentally minded farmers, praised the bill for providing permanent funds for "tiny but mighty" programs that help beginning and minority farmers, and for continuing the Conservation Stewardship Program that the House bill would have merged with another program.

The bill also provides \$50 million in annual funding for organic research, more than double the current level. Laura Batcha, executive director of the Organic Trade Association, said, "This will ensure stable, baseline mandatory funding for the program, and will enable organic farmers to meet the unique challenges they face."

Livestock groups got their key demand: \$300 million in mandatory funding for a national laboratory network for animal disease and preparedness, and a vaccine bank

to be used in case of outbreaks of dread diseases.

Animal-welfare advocates were pleased with the conference report's provisions to crack down on animal fighting, the dog-meat trade, and domestic violence against pets. The bill also eliminated a provision by Rep. Steve King making it illegal for a state to establish production standards on foods sold in that state, such as California has done with eggs. Marty Irby of Animal Wellness Action said the 2018 farm bill "may just be the best farm bill for animal protection in history!"

In a rare rebuke to the Trump administration, the report reestablishes the undersecretary for rural development, which Perdue downgraded to an assistant within his office.

House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway got his way with a provision that allows cousins, nieces, and nephews to qualify for farm subsidies.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, a longtime fighter for payment limits, voted against the bill, but he acknowledged that it contained so many provisions positive for agriculture, he expected it to pass. □



Rep. Collin Peterson likes the farm bill's dairy provisions.

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