



Farm bill may cost me a martini

IN MAY, I bet former Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan a martini that a new farm bill would be enacted in 2024. She took the side that it would not be finished until 2025.

I felt confident of my bet because Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow had announced she would not run for reelection in 2024. She has proven to be such a tough negotiator on previous farm bills that I was certain she would push through another one. Merrigan, who had just written an article on the challenges in the next farm bill, argued it would be difficult to pass in a presidential election year when the number of days Congress is in session is relatively short.

Last week, Merrigan, who served in the Obama administration and now heads the Swette Center for Sustainable Food Systems at Arizona State University, told me by email that she wants to “double down” on her bet because “Congress is a mess, to put it politely.”

This week, after the House passed a continuing resolution to fund the government that includes an extension of the 2018 farm bill through September 30, 2024, Stabenow and House Agriculture Committee Chairman Glenn Thompson both told reporters they are still determined to send a reauthorization to President Biden in 2024. Stabenow said she viewed the inclusion of the farm-bill extension as a signal they could complete their work next year.

But I’m less certain of my bet than I was in May. The House so far has been unable to act on the fiscal 2024 Agriculture and Food and Drug Administration appropriations bill because it contains a provision to forbid the mailing of abortion pills that moderate Republicans can’t swallow, and cuts to farm programs that rural Republicans don’t dare bring home. With the continuing resolution keeping the Agriculture Department open through Jan. 19, the ag and food world is likely to be embroiled in that appropriations battle, rather than the farm bill, until at least that date.

Stabenow maintains that her interest in passing a bill in 2024 comes from the fact that farmers need it, not because it could serve as a capstone to her distinguished career. Farm leaders say they are worried that commodity prices will fall while the costs of seed, fertilizer, and other inputs stay high, but there’s evidence that many farmers and ranchers aren’t as concerned as their leaders. The Agriculture Department says farm net income,

while not as high as in 2022, is still above average. In an October survey of 60 agricultural economists by the University of Missouri and *Farm Journal*, 50 percent of the economists said they believe a new farm bill won’t be passed until 2025. They cited high farm incomes and dysfunction in Washington as the reasons.

Stabenow told reporters Tuesday she wants “to hear more about a sense of urgency” from farm leaders. “Now is the time to coalesce in what we can do [to get] a bipartisan bill done,” she said.

That, of course, means farm leaders should begin accepting their inevitable compromises. But Sen. John Boozman, the top Republican on the committee, said he

doesn’t agree with Stabenow on this point. Boozman said farm leaders “are expressing urgency” but they “understand the times are so different [from] 2018 that we don’t just need to do something, we need to do the right thing.”

Boozman was referring to farm groups’ insistence that the bill raise the reference prices that trigger commodity subsidies. That’s a tall order because it would make the bill that much more expensive.

There is hope that Democrats’ wins in this month’s elec-

tions may convince conservative House Republicans, who want to cut benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program within the farm bill, that they need to back down and pass a bipartisan bill to help them keep their majority.

Leslie Sarasin, a Kentucky native who is president and CEO of FMI—The Food Industry Association, said last week that her deep-red state’s reelection of Democrat Andy Beshear as governor was a signal that Republicans and Democrats should work together to pass a farm bill that helps farmers and feeds hungry people.

But if Democrats win control of the House in 2024, as many analysts predict, it might be easier to pass a bill in 2025.

In her email, Merrigan said she is already “thinking about where we will go when I collect on my win.” I’m not willing to concede yet, but I won’t be surprised if I am paying for a martini or two in some expensive D.C. bar in early 2025. □



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