

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

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Prospects brighten for farm bill

AS CONGRESS HEADS HOME until after the election, what are the prospects of finishing a farm bill in the lame-duck session? Better than they were before Labor Day, but still very uncertain.

In the three weeks since Congress returned from the August break, farm groups have lobbied hard for completion of a new farm bill this calendar year rather than an extension of the 2018 law. Congressional agricultural leaders have also stated their commitment to finishing the bill this year. But neither the farm leaders nor members of Congress have given any signals that they are willing to compromise on their goals—or can find the money they say they need to write meaningful new legislation.

The September congressional session began with a National Farmers Union fly-in and a letter from more than 300 mainstream farm groups, including the Democratic-leaning NFU and the Republican-leaning American Farm Bureau Federation, telling Congress that writing a new farm bill this year is “imperative” because farmers face lower commodity prices and higher production costs.

The same week, a left-leaning coalition of 1,096 farm, conservation, nutrition, and union groups sent a letter to congressional leaders also urging passage of a new farm bill. But that coalition urged Congress to deliver a 2024 farm bill that begins with “protecting and strengthening the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP),” while also making “long overdue investments in the food and farm workers who keep our food supply chains secure, vibrant, and resilient.”

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition added that “expediency must not come at the expense of policies that address hunger, public health, farmers, workers, and the environment.”

Last week, the National Confectioners Association brought its members to Washington to point out to Congress that its members, as well as the American Sugar Alliance, which represents cane and beet growers, are backing the same changes to the sugar program. NCA President and CEO John Downs said that the 75 legislators with whom his members met were “encouraged” by the rare joint agreement but added that it “remains an outstanding question” whether the bill is passed this year.

But even without sugar-related differences, there are still plenty of sticking points. Nutrition advocates say lawmakers must reject a GOP proposal to remove a 2018 farm-bill provision that gives the Agriculture Department authority to

increase SNAP benefits. Both Democrats and Republicans want to bring the climate-related conservation program in the Inflation Reduction Act into the farm bill, but Republicans want to use some of its budget authority for other conservation programs, while Democrats insist on maintaining the climate-related guardrails on the IRA money.

The debate over the Agriculture secretary’s authority to use the Commodity Credit Corporation, USDA’s \$30 billion per year line of credit at the Treasury, also rages on. Democrats, backed by Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, say the secretary needs unfettered power to respond to crises, while Republicans want to restrict the authority and hope the savings can be used to increase subsidy payments.

House Agriculture Chair Glenn Thompson says the change could yield \$30 to \$40 billion over 10 years to be put toward subsidies, but the Congressional Budget Office has said there would not be more than \$10 billion in savings.

House Agriculture ranking member David Scott said in a memo he hopes the House and Senate agriculture committees will reach agreement on the budget before Congress leaves. Staff directors of the committees have been meeting, but there is no sign of significant progress.

The most hopeful signal that a bill might be passed this year has come from Senate Agriculture Chair Debbie Stabenow. Earlier this year, Stabenow said she was happy to go into retirement with the popular 2018 farm bill, the SNAP rewrite authority, and the climate-related provisions for conservation in place. This month, however, Stabenow has repeatedly signaled her determination to finish the bill this year. She may have her reasons for optimism. In a brief conversation, she said that a recent USDA report that showed higher food insecurity, particularly in Arkansas—home state of Senate Agriculture ranking member John Boozman—had changed the dynamics surrounding SNAP. Concerns that farmers need aid quickly may reinforce her position that increasing crop insurance is a higher priority than traditional crop-subsidy programs.

Vilsack said last week he believes congressional leaders will come up with policy compromises and money this year because waiting until 2025, when a new administration and a new Congress have to get organized, would “not be good for farm country.” □



Sen. Debbie Stabenow with Kamala Harris last week

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