

# Drought May Drive Farm Bill Passage



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There's nothing like a natural disaster to get the political juices flowing, and much of the nation's farm and ranch land is delivering one of epic proportions. With yet another week of hot, dry weather, crop conditions continue to deteriorate and pastures are drying up. On Monday, USDA reported that 45 percent of the nation's corn crop is now in poor or very poor condition, up from 38 percent just a week earlier.

"It's easy to ignore the farm bill when the weather is good and prices are good," noted House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla, in a recent interview. But he says the drought that's currently affecting more than 1,000 counties in 26 states – and spreading daily – could build pressure to advance his committee's version of a new farm bill, H.R. 6083, during the handful of legislative days left before the August recess.

With the end of session clock ticking, GOP House leaders face a long list of funding and fiscal issues, along with attempts to provide regulatory relief for businesses and expand trade with Russia. As a result, passage of a farm bill this fiscal year still seems like a long shot.

Yet, Lucas told me that "there are a series of potential combinations" that could guide passage before the current bill expires on Sept. 30. "At some point a piece of legislation that's expected to come to the floor, whether it is an appropriations bill or authorizing language for rules or regulations or taxes or whatever, might not be perfected at the time that they think it would be legislatively. That might create an opening," he explained.

"The urgency of the drought of 2012 may drive concern not only among ag groups in the countryside but their members, too," Lucas said. "Those members won't necessarily all be on the House Agriculture Committee and that could help get the attention of management."

But while Lucas acknowledges that "getting it done now is in everybody's best interest, we aren't quite there yet. There are just so many pieces in play. I have to play them as they evolve."

Lucas beat expectations when he won a larger than expected majority vote, 35-11, for farm bill passage in the House Agriculture Committee, after slogging through 97 of the 109 amendments that had been introduced and adopting 44 of them. His secret?

"Since the third grade I have generally operated in a way which has caused people to have very low expectations. And my net result has been to always over perform," he explained. "In the aftermath of the vote, many people in the room said it was easy. But in the months prior, it was predicted that it would be a battle royal, that civility would fade away, that we would fight non-stop, and the mark-up could take days or weeks," he related. That scenario was avoided, in part, because of his preparation with Ranking Member Collin Peterson, D-Minn., and commitment to letting everyone participate in the process.

"I tried very hard to conduct this meeting in the absolute spirit of fairness and in a straightforward way. For some underclassmen in that room, that might have been their first real experience at what some people might say is old school legislating."

Freshman Rep. Rick Crawford, R-Ark., appreciated Lucas' willingness to listen to members of all parts of the country and believes that the strong margin for passage in committee bodes well for floor action yet this year.

"I think it would have been dismissed had it been a one or two margin partisan deal but 35 to 11 makes a pretty compelling case to leader-

ship that we have been diligent. Ultimately, I was very pleased with the outcome," he explained. "The ag sector has been the one bright spot in the last few years with respect to our economy. Let's go on ahead and find a way to fit it into our (House) schedule so we can reconcile this and conference it with the Senate. I think that's going to be a win for everyone."

Lucas hopes some of that civility will carry over when the farm bill is considered on the House floor, but admits it will be "a wild process. That's one of the things that I've tried to get across to some of the newer members in the last few days. You think the farm bill markup was easy in committee; therefore it will be easy on the floor. It's a different world on the floor," especially since only 46 of the 432 current members have been through the markup process.

The House Agriculture Committee's Ranking member, Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., is not optimistic that GOP leaders in the U.S. House of Representatives will put the 2012 farm bill on the House floor before the August recess. However, he's confident lawmakers will get it done before the current law expires on Sept. 30.

"There's no good reason not to do this," emphasized Peterson, who added that he doesn't think Speaker Boehner is "the problem." But he added: "I don't think (House Majority Leader) Cantor's folks get this at all. They are clueless."

Peterson expects lawmakers to hear from a lot of their constituents over the August recess.

If nothing happens before the recess, Peterson says: "These guys are going to go home in August and get the hell beat out of them. So when they come back in September, it could be one of the first things they get done."

While he declined to provide specifics, he suggested there may be a way to start discussions on how to conference the House Agriculture Committee passed bill with the Senate passed version. He also wants to find a way to extend the standing disaster program for crops – even though such language is not included in either the version of the bill.

Both the House and Senate versions of the 2012 farm bill extend the livestock disaster assistance programs and a tree assistance program, but do not extend the Supplemental Revenue Assistance Program (SURE). Sens. Max Baucus, D-Mont., Jon Tester, D-Mont., Kent Conrad, D-N.D., and Tim Johnson, D-S.D., recently introduced S. 3384, which would extend SURE for the 2012 crop year and change calculations to speed up payments that, in the previous version, often frustrated farmers because of lengthy payment delays.

If and when the measure passes the House, Lucas says he's already talked to Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., and predicts that, with the exception of what could be contentious philosophical differences on the commodity title, conferencing the House and Senate versions together should go fairly smoothly. There are a number of areas, like the conservation title, where the language is very, very similar to the Senate language, he added.

But on the commodity title, the Senate version focuses on a shallow loss program and crop insurance, while the House Ag Committee version includes a price loss coverage option based on target prices – an option that the Senate Agriculture Committee's Ranking Member Pat Roberts, R-Kan., strongly opposes.

Asked if he would be willing to compromise and provide target prices for only rice and peanuts, Lucas said: "How as a parent do you sit at the table and pick and choose which of your children get to eat and which don't? From my perspective, all commodity groups have to be able to participate." Δ

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