

# How The Mid-Term Elections Will Impact The Next Farm Bill

*New Members Likely To Bring Renewed Focus On Cutting Federal Budget*



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**W**ith the dust barely dry on the 2008 Farm Bill, it almost seems too early to be thinking about writing another one. But the current Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Collin Peterson (D-MN), has made no bones about it: he wants to get started early next year and complete a bill prior to 2012.

In fact, Peterson has been meeting with several farm organization leaders, telling them that he intends to write a "baseline" bill, or one that uses existing funds for programs, rather than trying to find "new" money. Other House Agriculture Committee Democrats have been urging interest groups to get all of their farm bill ideas in by December so they can hold hearings and start drafting new legislation early next year.

There's only one problem. We won't know who is going to be in charge of the Committee until after Nov. 2. With many pollsters pointing to a tidal wave of frustrated voters willing to throw out dozens of incumbents, there could be over 100 new lawmakers this fall.

Chairman Peterson's own seat appears to be safe, but if Republicans pick up at least 39 seats in the House of Representatives, there could be a new Chairman in charge. And that's likely to be Oklahoma Republican Frank Lucas.

Lucas is not in quite as much of a hurry to write a new farm bill. In an exclusive interview last week, he told me that the fiscal environment will likely be better if we wait a year.

"If we write a Farm Bill a year early, we'll wind up with less resources to work with and a more difficult environment," Lucas explained. "Everything of course is subject to what happens in the election in November. Everything is subject to what the majority in the spring will do budget-wise, but from my own perspective, I think we're better to wait until 2012."

In the Senate, Agriculture Committee Chairman Blanche Lincoln is more inclined to accept the later time frame for working on a new farm bill. However, there is also a lot of uncertainty about who will be chairman of the Agriculture Committee next year.

Most polls indicate that current Chairman Blanche Lincoln (D-AR) is trailing her challenger, Rep. John Boozman by large margins. If she loses and the Democrats retain control of the Senate, Michigan Senator Debbie Stabenow may take the committee's helm. If the GOP gains 10 seats in the Senate this fall and regains the majority, ranking member Saxby Chambliss (R-GA) could once again be in charge of the committee and he's not eager to write a new farm bill next year either.

In most mid-term elections, the party in control of the White House usually loses some seats. But the expectation increases dramatically when the President's job approval rating hovers below 50%, as is the case with President Barack Obama. In 1993, President Bill Clinton's approval rating was at 46%, according to Gallup polling data, and the Democrats lost 53 seats to the GOP.

**New members**

Regardless of who is in the majority, there could be as many as 100 new members of Congress next year and most will have no prior experience with working on farm bills.

"We'll need to put a great deal of effort in educating these folks early," says Mary Kay Thatcher, director of public policy at the American Farm Bureau Federation, who noted that a high percentage of the incoming freshmen members will likely represent rural congressional districts.

Rep. Lucas (R-OK), the likely Ag Committee Chairman in a GOP-controlled House, says he expects to spend a huge amount of time in January and February educating new members.

"We've got to explain to them what rural America and production agriculture and processing are all about," he said.

Current Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN), told us that he fears the election of a lot of Tea Party-leaning Republicans would "be a problem for farm bills and farm policy."

Chandler Goule, vice president of government relations at the National Farmers Union, offered a more blunt assessment.

"If the Tea Party gets a lot of their members into Congress, I think you kiss a good chunk of the farm bill goodbye," Goule said, predicting that commodity and even conservation programs would face significant budget cutting pressure.

#### **Fiscal focus**

Whether or not the renewed focus on deficit reduction is driven by the Tea Party movement or other newly "reborn" fiscal conservatives, several members tell us there is likely to be a renewed push to cut all federal programs next year. If that's the case, farm programs will certainly be under the microscope.

Farm and commodity groups will be working to help the incoming lawmakers understand that gutting ag programs alone won't make a dent in the budget deficit.

While acknowledging that trillion-dollar deficits "do have consequences," Sam Willett, senior director of public policy at the National Corn Growers Association, hopes the ag community is able to have an adult conversation with the freshman class about the value of a reliable risk management safety net for producers.

"We have a challenge in terms of letting them know where our priorities are and, in some cases, they have may have received different messages during their campaigns," Willett explained.

At the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, VP of government affairs Colin Woodall thinks the likelihood of having so many new members of Congress increases the chances for progress on other key issues that are haunting many farmers and ranchers. He cites issues such as regulatory overkill by the Environmental Protection Agency and estate taxes.

"I think we're going to have a much easier time making the case to them on why the 'death' tax needs to be reformed," he said, adding that depending on how many Tea Party-backed candidates are elected, "the talk of repeal could come up again." Δ

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