

Lawmakers Aim For April 18th Farm Bill

Is this another deadline that will be made or missed?



SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

If I had a dollar for every farm bill deadline that's been missed over the last 15 months, I'd be raking in plenty of dough. It seemed like almost every Monday, lawmakers would report that progress was being made and

that something new would happen before the weekend, which turned out to be the following week and often times, a decision would be prolonged into the next month.

It's not that many people weren't trying. After lawmakers actually started getting down to details last year, the House finally approved their version of a new farm bill in July and the Senate followed suit in December. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) spent most of his winter break trying to flesh out scenarios for bringing the House and Senate versions together for a conference committee.

And it's not that the policy differences are that much different than what you currently have in the 2002 Farm Bill. Sure, there are some new programs and some different twists.

The big stumbling block continues to be the money, or lack thereof. Both the House and Senate want to spend more than their allotted under Congressional Budget rules. And several lawmakers, in lock step with the Bush Administration, don't want those additional dollars to come from any type of tax increase.

A \$10 billion breakthrough?

Sen. Saxby Chambliss (R-GA), who serves as ranking minority member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, told us that he is now more optimistic than ever before about the process. Last week, Chambliss, along with Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA), House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) and Ranking member Bob Goodlatte (R-VA) got together and directed staff to get to work on what will likely be a farm bill that's \$10 billion over the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) baseline.

Chambliss says that number is not "cast in stone." It could be \$9.5 billion or \$10.2 billion when all is said and done. Even the White House signaled that it could live with a bill that provides \$10 billion in extra spending – as long as no new taxes were involved.

Of course, the meeting occurred about one week before the current farm bill expires on March 15th – and they had to confront yet another deadline come and gone. Now, Chambliss predicts the farm bill is likely to be extended until April 18 – allowing time to get all of the details completed.

In the meantime, staff members are working almost around the clock to make the House and Senate policy changes fit with each other and within the budget parameters.

Everything is on the table when it comes to these meetings – except for a few hot political potatoes.

For example, Sen. Harkin said last week that

cutting direct payments could still be an option for funding other parts of the bill. Chambliss disagrees.

"It depends on how bad he wants a farm bill," Chambliss emphasized. "That's a non-negotiable item."

There have been a lot of discussions about conflicts over the role that the Senate Finance Committee will play in providing additional revenues, but Chambliss says Finance Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) and Ranking Member Chuck Grassley (R-IA) are doing "yeoman's work" in an effort to help the Agriculture Committees.

Chambliss said that the committee is moving ahead with a new farm bill, even though the dollars that could be provided by the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee have not yet been defined. If those committees provide additional dollars which are acceptable to the Agriculture Committees, programs in other areas may not have

Farm Bill and Date Completed

1985 Farm Bill – Food Security Act of 1985 (Dec. 23, 1985).

1990 Farm Bill – Food Agricultural Conservation and Trade Act of 1990 (Nov. 28, 1990).

1996 Farm Bill – Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (Apr. 4, 1996).

2002 Farm Bill – Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (May 13, 2002).

to be scaled back.

For example, if the Finance Committee wants to spend \$4 billion for a permanent disaster program, the Agriculture Committees will "save" that amount allocated for the same program somewhere else.

Chambliss expects the new bill to be written using the current CBO baseline, even though the House will technically be expected to use the new baseline after a new House budget resolution has been approved. Apparently, a similar situation occurred during final deliberations on the 1996 Farm Bill, which was not signed into law until April 4, 1996. Chambliss says he was assured by House leaders that they would not be required to use the new, revised baseline, if the House Rules Committee takes "some type of affirmative action."

The Georgia Senator doesn't expect to see any problems with extending the current farm bill for another month, although any Senator could object under a request for unanimous consent. "It's always a possibility," he added. Just weeks earlier, Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT) threatened to hold up Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer's nomination until he got more disaster aid for his Vermont dairy farmers.

With so many different obstacles, you can see why it's easy to wonder if April 18th will be another deadline that's come and gone, without a new farm bill. △

Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com