

New Farm Bill Now?



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Leaders representing the over fifty farm and rural organizations who are part of the "Farm Bill Now" coalition will stage another high-profile event next week on Capitol Hill to push lawmakers toward passage of the 2012 Farm bill.

"Agriculture is one of the few bright spots in the American economy," explained National Corn Growers Association First Vice President Pam Johnson during a recent press conference at the Farm Progress Show. "Our farmers continue to be more productive and innovative. But to continue that trend, we need to have some certainty about how we plan our business. And that is exactly what the farm bill does."

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-OK, is also ready to get a farm bill done. So ready that he told those attending the annual Great American Farm luncheon at the GOP convention in Tampa that, "I'm not sure which day, I'm not sure which month, but there will be a new farm bill."

Will it be this year? "That's the proverbial \$6 question," Lucas told me during a recent interview.

"It's still possible to do a farm bill this calendar year and theoretically, possible before Election Day," Lucas observed. But thus far, he's received no commitment from House leaders to advance the bill in September.

"We are ready to go to the floor. The question that confronts us in September is that we don't get back to the 10th and when we return, we will have only 8 days in September. Will time be made available to us?," he asked.

The Oklahoma Republican says he told his elected leadership, which he refers to as "the management," that they could "give me midnight to sunrise.... I don't care what time you give me. Just give me time and we'll progress forward."

"I know they are concerned about military sequestration, tax code issues, and a continuing resolution to address spending for the next six months. I know they have a lot of very important priorities.

"That's why, after we've been at home almost five weeks, my fellow members of the House need to remind management on both sides of the room that this is important," he added. Leadership needs to know, "it's not just Chairman Lucas saying we need a farm bill," he emphasized.

So why has the GOP leadership been reluctant to schedule floor time?

"I think the leadership is concerned that, by the time you get some Democrats who won't vote for a farm bill and some Republicans who won't vote for the farm bill and the nervousness of an election year and suddenly you don't have 218 votes.

"I don't believe that's the case. I believe that, if you have an open, straightforward process, and I would prefer to have a rule that allows 20-30

amendments, that we can achieve consensus," Lucas explained. "The debate will help educate the members as a whole of what we are trying to do."

Asked about the possibility of passing an extension before the current farm bill expires on Sept. 30, Lucas says he's still focused on passing a bill through regular order. And that will continue to be his focus when Congress returns next month.

"I'm basically telling both sides that, as the drought has demonstrated in the Midwest this year and in the Southwest the last two years, economic certainty is important to farmers and their bankers and ultimately consumers.

"Let's do a farm bill. Let's do the responsible thing," he emphasized.

Of course, failure to pass a new farm bill before the current one expires on Sept. 30, 2012 does not mean that all of the programs authorized under the 2008 farm bill will go away on that date.

Crop insurance is permanently authorized under the Federal Crop Insurance Act. Most mandatory farm bill programs will need to be reauthorized, but the last year of support under the 2008 farm bill's commodity programs is the 2012 crop year or the time the first commodity is harvested in 2013, according to "Possible Extension or Expiration of the 2008 Farm Bill," a report by the Congressional Research Service.

However, dairy farmers who are already drowning in red ink and struggling to buy high-priced feed could be especially hard hit. The Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) expires Sept. 30, 2012 and dairy price supports and export incentives expire on December 31, 2012.

For many conservation programs, program authority is often permanent, but the authority to receive mandatory funding expires at the end of fiscal 2012, CRS points out. One exception: The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). "Absent an extension of mandatory funding authority, no new contracts or agreements could be approved," the report notes.

Many of farm bill nutrition programs rely on annual appropriations regardless of whether they use mandatory or discretionary funds, notes CRS. "Therefore, a regular appropriation could be sufficient to continue most of the major programs. Exceptions include a farmers market nutrition programs for seniors and a few pilot or other small nutrition programs."

Several international trade and food aid programs would expire unless Congress passes a new farm bill, including those providing export credit guarantees, facilities credit guarantees, export market promotion, dairy export subsidies and technical assistance for specialty crops. Authority to replenish stocks of the Bill Emerson Humanitarian Trust expires Sept. 30, 2012 and authority to provide food aid under the Food for Peace Act and to provide appropriations for the McGovern-Dole International Food for Education and Child Nutrition Program also would expire Dec. 31, 2012. Δ

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