



Farm bill faces uncertain future in U.S. House

Lawmakers and ag groups say food stamps will be a deciding factor.

By Christopher Doering – June 15th, 2013

WASHINGTON — Now that the farm bill has breezed through the Senate with broad, bipartisan support, the focus shifts to the House, where the legislation faces a far more uncertain future.

The \$500 billion bill, a sweeping five-year package that includes crop subsidies, rural economic development and conservation programs, easily passed the Senate on Monday by a vote of 66-27 — the second time in a year the chamber sent the farm bill to the Republican-led House.

Although the measure died there a year ago after leadership declined to move forward, citing a lack of support, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, has promised “vigorous and open debate” and a vote this time. The House could take the bill up as soon as this week.

Farm groups and GOP lawmakers noted that even though Boehner’s support for the legislation helped win the backing from a handful of key Republicans, it still will be a fight to get it through the House.

“The House is going to be more difficult. There are ... a hundred or over a hundred House members that have never voted on a farm bill because the House didn’t vote last year,” said Craig Hill, president of the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation. “It’s hard to predict” the outcome, he said.

The Senate and House farm bills are largely identical on the farm policy changes, with both taking the savings from the elimination of the \$5 billion per year in direct payments and shifting it into expanded crop insurance programs. The bills also streamline conservation programs and offer concessions to southern rice and peanut growers who would have felt the brunt of losing direct payments.

Lawmakers and farm groups said the deciding factor that will determine whether the House passes a bill will be food stamps. The Senate has proposed about \$400 million per year in cuts to the food stamp program, but the House is pushing reductions topping \$2 billion annually — or almost 3 percent of the program.

While Boehner and the GOP leadership are under pressure from Republicans to make even deeper cuts to the program, Democrats have said the reductions already proposed are too drastic. So far, 134 of the 201 Democrats in the House have signed a resolution refusing to make any cuts to food stamp programs.

The fear is that, similar to last year, the pull from both sides seeking changes to food stamps will siphon off crucial votes needed for final passage in the House.

Food aid accounts for almost 80 percent of spending in the farm bill and has given lawmakers from nonrural areas a significant stake in the outcome. An estimated 48 million people, about one in seven Americans, depend on food stamps, now known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

“The thing that is frustrating for the American farmer is our farm bill is becoming a food stamps bill,” said Lisa Richardson, executive director for the South Dakota Corn Growers Association. “That’s a uniqueness that always allowed it to pass, but it’s also what’s preventing it currently.”

Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Washington-based think tank the Cato Institute, said deeper cuts to food stamps will be key if the farm bill is going to receive enough support in the House.

“I would be astounded if the House leadership allowed the farm bill to pass the chamber without much bigger cuts to food stamps,” he said.

After the farm bill died last year in the House, Congress voted to extend the 2008 farm law until Sept. 30. In a letter sent to lawmakers on Thursday, the American Soybean Association and the National Corn Growers Association, among other groups, underscored the looming deadline and urged the House to pass a bill to help farmers have a better understanding of how to run their operations.

“We were pleased to see the 2013 farm bill pass with such strong support in the Senate ... and urge the House to swiftly follow suit,” said Pam Johnson, president of the National Corn Growers Association and a corn farmer from Floyd, Ia. “Passing a comprehensive, market-oriented farm bill is critically important to not only agriculture but to every American.”

Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley said the House needs to pass a farm bill this month so lawmakers in both the House and Senate can have time in July to merge their bills into one final measure they will vote on. Congress leaves for summer recess in early August and does not return to Washington until after Labor Day.

“It’s touch and go” as to whether the farm bill makes it out of the House, Grassley, a Republican, recently told reporters. “If we saw anything last year it was that letting the farm bill expire creates even greater uncertainty and anxiety for those who care about farm legislation.”