

The farm bill will be no easy task amid earmark ban, budget cuts

By Debbie Siegelbaum - 05/15/11 09:02 AM ET

Writing the next farm bill will be no easy task for lawmakers as they operate under a moratorium on earmarks and a severely reduced budget proposal that seeks to cut overall spending.

The nearly \$300 billion omnibus legislation is one of Congress' largest spending measures and covers food and agriculture policies for five years. The often-controversial provisions in the farm bill can affect not only farming, but international trade, nutrition and environmental regulations.

"When people think traditionally of 'earmarks,' they think of new spending, new programs, new stuff," House Agriculture Committee chairman Rep. Frank Lucas (R-Okla.) told The Hill. "That's not the world the next farm bill's going to be written in."

According to Lucas, the Republican majority's moratorium on all earmarks during the 112th Congress will be less of an issue as the Agriculture Committee operates under a constrained fiscal year 2012 budget proposal that aims to slash the national deficit.

"I think it's less of a problem because, simply, I'm taking fewer marbles and trying to string them into longer lines," he said.

For committee ranking member Rep. Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), the moratorium is a moot point since the last farm bill in 2008 didn't contain any.

"We didn't have earmarks; when I did the last one, I refused to have any earmarks," he said.

House Agriculture Committee vice chairman Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-Va.) took the earmark discussion a step further, telling The Hill, "The farm bill never contains earmarks."

"I've done three farm bills since I've been here and they've all been clean, no earmarks," he said.

That claim doesn't quite square with watchdog groups, however. According to Pete Sepp, executive vice president of the National Taxpayers Union, the last farm bill contained nearly \$1 billion in earmarks out of nearly \$300 billion total spent, but they were in fact there.

"There has to be a much bigger difference between 2008 and 2011 than three years," Sepp wrote in an email. "There needs to be an unequivocally clean bill, without earmarks."

For trade group American Farm Bureau, the answer comes down simply to how ones defines an earmark.

"What I would think of as a definition of earmarks is not in there," said Mary Kay Thatcher, director of public policy at AFB, referring to the typical understanding of earmarks as set asides for different programs.

This sentiment was echoed by Sallie James, a trade policy analyst with the Cato Institute.

"The farm bill is just one big earmark," she said, referring to the bill's way of sending money to special

interests.

Though a consensus was not reached among the watchdogs, all agreed that the moratorium against earmarks was far less important to the future farm bill than the cutbacks proposed in the FY12 federal budget.

“The biggest thing is going to be budget, budget, budget,” said Thatcher. “This bill is going to be a whole lot more difficult [to write] than previous bills.”

According to Lucas, preliminary budget numbers indicate that the committee will be working with several billion dollars less overall than in 2008.

“The numbers I’ve seen so far indicate that I’ve got about \$8 or \$9 billion in baseline spending in the ‘08 farm bill ... that doesn’t have any baseline for it [in 2012],” he said. “So even if we just took the old farm bill, scratched out 2012 and wrote 2017 everywhere, just to extend it for five years, I’d be about \$9 billion short.”

For Peterson, the numbers just don’t add up when compared with proposed cuts across the rest of the government.

“They’re asking us to take 24 percent to the rest of the government’s 14; so that’s not fair,” he said. “It’s got to be reasonable. We’re willing to take cuts, but they have to be commensurate with everybody else.”

Goodlatte conceded that cuts “will make it harder to write the kind of farm bill we’ve had in the past,” but “there will be a lot less money and there should be a lot less money given the huge deficits we’re running.”

Such significant cuts could make new programs difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

The 2008 farm bill saw many new programs put in place, but “it will be extremely challenging to do that this time around,” said Robert Guenther, senior vice president of public policy for the United Fresh Produce Association.

“It will be about show me the money, or show me where to take it from,” he added.

New programs might still be possible, according to Goodlatte.

“It depends on how much they cost. If they’re new programs that replace old programs and they’re less expensive, they might have a shot,” he said. “But if they’re new programs in addition to old programs, that will be tough.”

The several billion-dollar shortfall in baseline spending “kind of precludes any new programs” though, Lucas said.

“It won’t be a matter of creating grandiose new programs,” he said. “The question will be what programs do we save ... how we do reconfigure things so as to try and achieve more with fewer dollars.”

Though the numbers are grim under the proposed budget, they may not be as applicable when the committee actually starts writing the farm bill.

According to Lucas, the House Agriculture Committee will write the new farm bill next year, and will use baseline – or spending projection numbers – for one year from now.

“The strategy now is to wait until next year because this budget is so bad and the prices so high,” echoed Peterson. “If prices go down, then our baseline goes up, so right now we’re in a holding pattern until next year.”

Also contributing to the committee’s desire to delay is the addition of 23 new members out of 46 total.

“I need time to get my committee prepared to make these tough decisions. Cutting is tougher than adding; it’s a lot tougher,” Lucas said.

The committee will also buy needed time if the Senate moves forward with its farm bill ahead of the House.

Senate Agriculture Committee chairwoman Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) has “indicated that she would like to move in a quicker time frame than I think we will in the House,” Lucas said.

“I told her, ‘If the Senate committee’s ready to go and you’re ready to go, then move,’” he added. “I have a certain amount of things I’ve got to accomplish to be ready. I’ll move when we get there.”

The House and Senate Agriculture Committees will operate under different budget numbers in the interim, and will work out the differences when both arrive at conference committee.

That plan was echoed across the aisle.

“The Senate needs to do their budget. I’m encouraging [them] to go first because I think they’ll get a better bill out of there, and then we’ll see what happens,” Peterson said.

Until then, lawmakers, farm groups and watchdogs alike will wait and see how the federal budget chips fall.

“We’re all facing the same thing. The budget’s going to drive the issue -- the discussion on the farm bill -- rather than policy right now,” Guenther said. “The numbers are going to drive much of the debate.”

As of now, the House aims to have the farm bill on President Obama’s desk before he goes out to campaign in August 2012.

But, “the biggest challenge is just money,” said Lucas.