

# THE OKLAHOMAN

## Congress has no appetite for sweeping farm policy changes

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THE House defeat of a federal farm bill was surprising but not shocking. There was much to dislike in the bill for members of both political parties.

For one thing, the bill's spending was primarily devoted not to farming, but to food stamps. About 80 percent went to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. As we've noted before, the cost of the food stamp program has surged 41 percent since 2009 due to eligibility changes and "stimulus" legislation. The House plan would have reduced the program around 3 percent, far more than the Senate version.

Imposing minimal cuts after years of explosive growth was hardly draconian, yet President Barack Obama threatened a veto. At the same time, House conservatives wanted larger cuts. They successfully amended the bill to impose food stamp work requirements, which led many Democrats to vote against the bill. It failed 234-195 last week.

Many conservatives also were concerned about farm subsidies in the bill, which perpetuated policies that can actually *increase the cost of food* for consumers. Consider the bill's provisions for sugar growers, which maintained domestic production controls and limits on the import of *less-expensive* sugar from foreign markets.

The Cato Institute notes the program "inflates domestic sugar to twice the world price" and costs U.S. families an extra \$2 billion annually. The Coalition for Sugar Reform cites estimates showing three manufacturing jobs are lost for every one job saved through high sugar prices.

Another provision of the House bill would have guaranteed farmers of Japonica rice a government payment if market prices drop below 115 percent of the average price for all types of rice. Rep. Doug LaMalfa, a California Republican and fourth-generation Japonica rice farmer who serves on the House Agriculture Committee, was among those promoting this provision, generating accusations of self-dealing.

Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., promoted a dairy market stabilization program that incentivized producers to quickly cut supply when prices fall below certain targets even as the U.S. Department of Agriculture bought more dairy products in response. The intent was to rapidly force prices above what the free market supports, artificially increasing consumer costs.

Some proposals did move farm policy in the right direction, such as eliminating many duplicate programs, ending the controversial practice of making payments to people who don't farm, and making it harder for states to manipulate eligibility for food stamps. Backers also noted the congressional proposals promoted crop insurance over crop subsidies as a safety net — although critics felt taxpayers would cover too much of the premium cost.

Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Cheyenne, chairs the agriculture committee and is House point man on the farm bill. He deserves credit for taking on a herculean task and trying to advance some needed, if limited, reforms.

Defeat of the bill doesn't end this debate or eliminate bad farm policy. Existing law is terribly flawed; an even worse Senate proposal remains alive. Few will seriously argue that the corporate welfare represented by many farm subsidies is rational or beneficial to American consumers. But with Republicans controlling only the House, dramatic market-based reform of federal farm policy is virtually impossible at this time.

Instead, Republicans should advance whatever reforms they can in this environment. Under these circumstances, even modest improvements in farm and food stamp policy would represent a major victory.