



Sugar, Monsanto and Tobacco All in Crosshairs on Senate Farm Bill

The ag bill food fight begins as senators add their own amendments

By: Lauren Fox – May 20, 2013

The floodgates of farm bill amendments opened Monday as senators rushed to put their own touches on the \$955 billion agriculture bill.

The legislation as written would save \$23 billion over the next decade by tightening restrictions on the country's food stamps program and cutting direct payments to farmers, but lawmakers are hoping to add their own cost-shaving provisions to the bill as well.

Here are three amendments to watch for:

Repealing the so-called Monsanto Protection Act

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., will introduce an amendment to the farm bill, which would repeal the Farmer Assurance Provision, a bill that allows farmers who use biotech seeds to keep planting them even as courts reassess whether the USDA followed protocol when it approved the use of the seeds. The legislation attracted the ire of conservative and liberal lawmakers in March as well as voters because it was an anonymous, unrelated and last-minute add on to a critical continuing resolution to keep the government funded. Critics said that the bill allowed Monsanto to keep selling seeds that may pose health risks to consumers. More than 300,000 Americans signed a petition calling on lawmakers to repeal the section. While the provision will expire in September if lawmakers do nothing, food-rights and free-market groups are applauding Merkley's farm bill amendment as a courageous move.

"The American people are tired of legislation being written in back room deals. The Monsanto Protection Act was the last straw," says Dave Murphy, the founder and executive director of Food Democracy Now, a progressive group that fights for food transparency.

Of course not everyone will be on board. Monsanto and other big agriculture businesses are major players on Capitol Hill. In 2012, Monsanto alone spent \$5.9 million lobbying.

Jon Entine, the head of the Genetic Literacy Project at George Mason University, has said that the provision has been wrongly targeted, is harmless and protects farmers not Monsanto.

Reforming the U.S. sugar program

Once again, senators are introducing an amendment to reform the country's sugar program. The current "sweet deal" restricts the amount of raw sugar that can be imported from overseas and sold in the U.S., which leads to artificially high prices, candy

makers and bakery owners say. The CATO Institute estimated last year that the program was responsible for inflating the price of a pound of sugar by 50 percent. Sugar producers, meanwhile, argue the program is essential to making sure the U.S. has a stable sugar supply in an industry where the substance is used in everything from cookies to canned soup. The bipartisan provision, cosponsored by Sens. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., Mark Kirk, R-Ill., and Patrick Toomey, R-Pa., would eliminate certain price supports that lawmakers say make sweets more expensive for consumers.

"The sugar program is broken and this is a smart, common sense fix. Right now, American families are footing the bill for an outdated program that offers a sweet deal to a small group of sugar growers and processors," Shaheen said in a statement.

A nearly identical amendment died on the Senate floor last year after garnering 46 votes.

But confectioners have been lobbying hard. Already this year, they have spent \$125,000 on Capitol Hill. That is just a fraction, however, of the more than \$1 million the American Crystal Sugar lobby has spent.

Doing away with tobacco subsidies

Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., introduced an amendment that would stop tobacco farmers from being able to cash in on taxpayer-subsidized crop insurance.

McCain argues that because tobacco is a more profitable crop than corn or soybeans, farmers shouldn't be eligible for the safety net like farmers in other industries.

"Since 2004, we've spent more than \$276 million on insurance subsidies for tobacco," McCain said. "It turns out Joe Camel's nose has been under the tent all this time in the form of these hidden crop insurance subsidies."

The \$333 million in savings the amendment is estimated to generate would be used to pay down the country's federal deficit.