

Farm and Food Groups Call For Full and Fair Farm Bill

On July 19, KRC joined with 243 other farm and food groups issuing a joint statement to Congress to urge passage of a "Full and Fair Farm Bill Now" and to quickly move to conference committee the House-passed and Senate-passed versions of the Farm Bill.

The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition (NSAC) issued the following statement along with the release of the letter:

"Today 243 food and farm organizations from around the country called on Congress to appoint conferees and get to work immediately on producing a final full and fair Farm Bill before the current farm bill extension expires on September 30. The joint statement speaks with urgency to the need for real farm policy reform, equity for all parts of agriculture, and strong nutrition assistance measures."

The joint statement from farm and food groups urges leaders of Congress to move to conference a full and fair Farm Bill this summer, which includes all titles (including those programs within the Nutrition Title), full funding for conservation programs, and important commodity and crop insurance reforms. Additionally, the groups pledge to work with Congress to secure passage of a farm bill that restores robust funding for programs that support:

- *beginning, socially disadvantaged, tribal, women and veteran farmers;
- *rural economic development and job creation, including renewable energy projects;
- *fruit and vegetable production and organic farmers and ranchers; and
- *farmers markets, healthy food access, and community food and urban agriculture projects.

House Cut Nutrition Program Out of Their Version

On July 11, the U.S. House of Representatives passed a version of the farm bill that stripped the nutrition title (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program or food stamps) from the bill. This marked a huge shift in farm and food politics, and signaled an increasingly complex road ahead to get to a full-five year bill and adequate funding for nutrition programs. Cutting SNAP benefits has been part of a conservative Congressional agenda that appears to blame the victim, arguing that the mere availability of food aid increases those on the rosters and that cutting government spending is necessary for a balanced budget and deficit reduction. Never mind that times have been hard for the unemployed or underemployed, and that many of the jobs available do not pay a living wage, thus increasing the need for food assistance.

Historically, the nutrition programs have been part of the Farm Bill in order to garner the support of urban Congressional districts for farm programs. The linkage emphasized in a very direct concrete way the connection between those who raise the food and those who suffer from hunger in this country, and originally provided an outlet for over production. But the opposition to splitting out the nutrition programs from the rest of the farm bill has brought together some interesting allies. Groups ranging from the American Farm Bureau to the Environmental Working Group oppose splitting the bill, and favor a full five year plan including the nutrition title-- presumably because they can all see that a full Farm Bill needs broad urban and rural support.

Opponents are also concerned about another measure in the House bill. This measure would repeal the farm bill provision that forces a reversion to the commodity programs of the 1938 and 1949 farm bills if a new farm bill and new commodity title is not agreed to or the most current farm bill is not extended. The House bill would replace that long-standing provision with a new measure making the 2013 commodity title permanent law. This would lock in place subsidies without reform and payments favoring a few commodities, thus continuing what some call an unfair and unjust system.

Making the current subsidy program permanent would also remove much of the incentive to pass a new farm bill in the future, leaving conservation, research, rural development and other programs vulnerable at a time when we need them the most to ensure natural resource protection, provide research and education, and tie in rural development

opportunities.

The House bill has now gone to the Senate, where the question is whether or not this can mark the beginning of a conference committee effort to come to a compromise for a full five-year bill. The Senate appears to prefer their version of the farm bill which includes the nutrition programs. But House members are said to be working on a separate bill to cut funds from the nutrition program. If this is what House leadership chooses, the path to a full five year farm bill is very problematic.

According to NSAC, delaying and going back to the House floor with a partisan food stamp bill would effectively end the now three-year old effort to get a new farm bill this year and that another farm bill extension will become necessary.

NSAC argues that another extension will itself become a major new round of debate. The current extension we are operating under left many programs related to local and regional food and jobs, rural development, beginning farmer, etc. in limbo, so a further extension threatens their survival.

Thus, doing a new bill is the best choice and the conference committee should waste no time getting started. The choice is in the hands of the House majority leadership and whether they can garner support to move forward in a spirit of compromise -- which unfortunately is something they can't seem to manage on any number of very important issues these days.