

Rocky road ahead, but Farm Bill still doable

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LINCOLN—Farm-bill politics this year reflect the broader political dynamics in Congress these days—the triumph of ideology over consensus, said a University of Nebraska-Lincoln public policy specialist.

The Republican-controlled House of Representatives finally approved a new farm bill earlier this month, but one that stripped out the food-stamp provisions that have been part of the package for decades. The House bill now heads to an uncertain future in conference with the Senate version, which includes the nutrition elements.

It's likely to take many months to sort out, perhaps going past the ostensible Sept. 30 deadline to the "real" Dec. 31 deadline, said Brad Lubben, UNL public policy specialist.

The political environment has changed, Lubben said. Redistricting of House districts has made many of them less competitive between the parties.

"Redistricting has left us with fewer competitive races and some members have to worry more about their primary races than the general election," Lubben said. In that environment, members from both parties are likely to take their cues from their respective political bases. That leads to increased ideology and less bridge-building consensus.

Lubben pointed out that while conservative Republicans are taking the heat for the House's split of farm and food legislation, liberal Democrats, too, have contributed to the current standoff.

"Politically speaking, the food side of the coalition abandoned the coalition too. ... Back in June, the food side was arguing they shouldn't take any cuts and the farm side should shoulder all of the proposed budget cuts," Lubben said.

That bill proposed less than 3 percent in cuts for food programs and more than 10 percent in cuts for farm and conservation planks. It still didn't get enough Democratic support, Lubben said.

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As for what happens next, House Republicans are suggesting action on a nutrition-only bill that could also become part of the farm-bill conference process. If that fails, they could go into conference without an official position on the nutrition package. That could put them in a weak position in negotiations with Senate colleagues, Lubben said.

Lubben said a nutrition-only bill that could get House approval likely would have even bigger cuts than the bill proposed in June, meaning it would draw few Democrats' votes. But any package that emerges from conference with both farm and food-program planks is likely to be "a bill that (House Republicans) like even less" than what they've previously opposed.

"It seems clear that the final version from conferencing with the Senate would be something left of what the House passed in July and probably left even of what they failed to pass back in June," Lubben predicted.

Still, many conservatives are getting exactly what they sought, Lubben said. "Far right interest groups pushed for separating farm and food programs in the farm bill ... They wanted an ideological debate on both parts," he added. "Of course, some of those same conservative groups were then disappointed that the farm-only legislation passed the House without substantially more reforms and budget cuts that what had failed back in June."

"There are some very rural, very conservative districts where representatives voted against the bill both times. Are those districts that really dislike government spending more than they like farm programs? It could be."

The path ahead is challenging, but Lubben pointed out, "We are a step closer."

"I've been optimistic for two years that we would get a new farm bill done based on the fact that we know it's got to be done," Lubben said. "I'm still optimistic."

Then, he added with a laugh, "maybe it's not well founded."

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