



Key lawmakers say new farm bill is completed

After making a few more changes, they plan to roll out details Thursday.

By Sara Wyant

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Key farm bill negotiators emerged from a closed door session Wednesday afternoon to report that they've finished work on a new farm bill after taking some additional steps to address White House requests for reforms. They plan to roll out details during a press conference Thursday afternoon, after finalizing some additional budget scoring.

"The bill is now finished," explained Rep Bob Goodlatte, the ranking GOP member of the House Agriculture Committee, and he says he's inclined to support the bill.

"We are going to go ahead with the drafting of the bill and circulating the conference for signatures and hope to have legislation on the floor next week," Goodlatte added. No additional conference meetings will be held and sources report that the measure was already being sent to some conferees this afternoon.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson (D-MN) and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) both said they hope to schedule a farm bill vote in the House and Senate next Wednesday.

One of the last issues to be decided in the last 24 hours was the issue of income limits in order to qualify for farm program payments. None of the principals would provide details, but at least two sources report that the final package sets a \$750,000 hard cap on adjusted gross income (AGI) levels for farmers. Those earning over that amount would no longer be eligible for direct payments. A hard cap of \$500,000 would be set for non-farmers.

Direct payments would be capped at \$40,000 per person, rather than the \$50,000 previously proposed and counter-cyclical payments would be capped at \$65,000. The three entity rule would be eliminated, but because both spouses are eligible for subsidies, the income limits effectively could double for married couples.

Limits would also apply to conservation: A \$1 million "soft" cap would be established for land stewardship payments. However, there would be no limit if more than two-thirds of a person's revenue was from farming. The Secretary would be able to waive the limits for environmentally sensitive lands.

Senator Tom Harkin said he was very happy with the way the conservation title ended up, with about \$4 billion in additional funding.

Veto threat?

Still unknown: Whether or not President Bush will veto the final package. During a meeting today, Goodlatte said the President thanked him for his efforts to address a number of the administration's requests, but expressed his continued concerns about the package. He also said the President indicated that members would vote the concerns of their districts.

"He made it clear that he still was not there," said Goodlatte.

The Virginia Republican didn't want to speculate on whether or not there would be enough votes in the House to override a veto, should one occur. But he expects support for the bill to be "quite strong."

"We've not whipped on it, but traditionally, farm bills have received very strong support on the Republican side," Goodlatte explained. "This farm bill is less costly than the House bill or the Senate bill or the last farm bill. So we think there is a great deal to be said for the fiscal responsibility of this bill." The final package is expected to be less than \$10 billion over the CBO baseline, but Goodlatte cautioned that scoring is not final.

Sen. Kent Conrad, who chairs the Senate Budget Committee, described the final package as "really well done. "

"I would hope that, when the President hears the case we will lay out tomorrow and hears the details, he will support the legislation," emphasized Conrad.

"I think people are going to be quite impressed by this bill. They will be quite pleasantly surprised."

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