



## Chairman Harkin wants agriculture looking ahead

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Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin says he basically has two bottom lines when it comes to developing the 2007 Farm Bill: ensuring profitability and providing a safety net for agriculture. Beyond that, he wants a bill that can “really push us into the future.

**“We need to get agriculture looking ahead, not looking back,”** he told A-P during an exclusive interview last week, where he talked about several new program ideas associated with renewable energy. “Change is hard and we need some help to make transitions. **But those who embrace change usually come out ahead.”**

Yet, the Iowa Democrat has yet to hold a subcommittee meeting to start writing the next farm bill. And when he does, many veteran farm policy observers believe that he’ll have a tough time getting any major changes out of his own committee. Preliminary efforts within the House Agriculture Committee indicate that proposals to tighten up and modify some of the existing 2002 Farm Bill programs will generate a whirlwind of resistance.

As a farm bill veteran who served as chairman when the 2002 Farm Bill was written and worked on numerous others, Harkin is accustomed to the challenges. So, with all of his experience, what’s taking so long to start committee debate on a new bill?

**“The biggest holdup is the money and CBO (Congressional Budget Office) scoring so we know what things are going to cost.** We have to have that,” he emphasized. “The other thing that takes a long time...is because agriculture is not a simple matter. He outlined a number of competing interests, including specialty crops, conservation, and especially, renewable energy

“Agriculture is now being called upon to provide energy for America. We need to decide how we are going to meet that and do it in a way that protects our soil and water and also provides rural economic development. ...that’s going to be a big part of this farm bill.”

**Are regional divisions going to represent a tougher challenge in 2007 than past?**

“There have always been regional problems. I’ve often said that farm bills don’t break down by party lines; they break down by regional lines and the various commodities. I don’t think it will be too much of a regional problem...”

What about differing views on the commodity title from members representing the Plains states and the Midwest? Will this create problems within the committee?

“I don’t know. It is true that wheat didn’t get the right kind of adjustment that they should have had in terms of their loan rates and support prices. **But I don’t think the answer is necessarily more direct payments.** We have to think new and start looking ahead. “We can’t keep going back to this old program, that old program --- that’s not the answer.”

“If anything we need a better counter-cyclical program. The wheat people say they didn’t like it (the current program) because they didn’t have any yields and didn’t get anything out of it. **Well, maybe that argues for a revenue-based approach.**”

Harkin says it’s important to talk about future farm programs in a broader context. “New demands on agriculture are going to require change. **We have to develop cellulosic-based ethanol, big time, and I mean soon...in the next 10 years.**” Some of the Plains states would be ideal to grow some of the crops, like switchgrass, that can be converted to cellulosic ethanol, he emphasized. Wheat straw can also be a good source of biomass.

“I’m looking ahead. My vision is that we are going to have cellulosic ethanol plants in the Plains States and in the South. **Let’s face it. Cotton has a problem.** I don’t want to pull the rug out from underneath of them, but can we justify keeping a cotton program where more and more is forfeited to the government and we keep building up huge stocks of cotton like we did cheese? Remember the caves (which were used to store surplus dairy products)? **To say we need to continue the cotton program like we’ve had it would be like saying well, we’ll just fill up more caves with cheese.**”

“Cellulose is going to be very, very big and the South can play a big role in that, whether it’s wood pulp, sugar cane, grasses or other things...we just have to help them transition.” Harkin envisions initiatives to promote the production of renewable fuels from new farm products, including funding for bio-refinery pilot projects and loan guarantees to encourage the development of more efficient biofuel production technology. On-farm production and processing incentives would be tied hand in hand to avoid a “chicken or egg” situation in which one could occur without the other, he explained.

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