



Harkin continues calls for reform, rural development priorities

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In his weekly press call with reporters on Thursday, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Agriculture, reinforced some of the comments he made during our exclusive interview last week and **outlined his agenda for rural development**. He called for **“a reform farm bill, not a farm bill that is looking in the rear-view mirror”** and said a basic extension of crop subsidies, such as the one passed earlier this week by the House Ag Subcommittee on Commodities, is **“never going to pass”** on the House floor. Harkin served in the House for a decade before getting elected to the Senate in 1984.

Citing a Washington Post story that ran Wednesday, Harkin said it was the latest in a series of articles spotlighting inequities in the distribution of USDA funds. The story profiled the extremely poor community of Shelby, Mississippi, where most of the residents are African-American. This community desperately needs funds for rural economic development. But while the surrounding county has received \$200 million in crop subsidies over the last five years, primarily for very large farms, rural residents received just a tiny fraction of that amount in USDA Rural Development grants.

“This is a deeply disturbing story. And it demonstrates exactly why we need a more balanced, reform-minded farm bill that meets the broader needs of rural America.” said Harkin in his opening statement. **“Bear in mind that the farm bill is the single most important piece of legislation for improving the quality of life and economic vitality of our rural communities.**

“In many places, the loss of population and jobs has created a negative cycle that feeds on itself. In the new farm bill, we have a real opportunity to help reverse this negative dynamic. “

To address some of these issues, Harkin called for **ramping up production of biofuels, continuing the value-added product development grants, and encouraging new venture capital programs**. He wants to provide some \$500 million for a new Rural Collaborative Investment Program, which will support clusters of communities that come together to plan and implement regional economic development strategies. In addition, Harkin wants to expand broadband access into the countryside, describing it as a **“basic, essential utility”** for farmers and others.

“Just as we made a commitment to rural electrification in the 1930s, today we need a commitment to connecting rural America to the internet.”

“Rural America also needs better access to other amenities and necessities that people in cities take for granted,” he emphasized, calling for new day-care facilities for children, and assisted-living facilities for seniors.

“We need to give rural hospitals assistance in purchasing modern equipment. We need to assist rural communities in improving infrastructure, including electricity, clean drinking water, and wastewater treatment.” Harkin said there are some \$2 billion in outstanding applications for water and wastewater improvements and he plans to propose enough funding in the farm bill to cut the number of unfunded applications in half.

Harkin said he might need all of the \$20 billion in reserve fund spending to accomplish his goals and that level would allow for "a bill I can guarantee you will pass the Senate and be widely supported." Without new funding, "I'm not certain we'll ever get a bill passed."

A reform-oriented farm bill would likely improve the current counter-cyclical program to one that's revenue based, Harkin said. In addition, support prices need to be rebalanced for crops that didn't get the right levels in the 2002 bill and crop bases need to be updated.

"What happened in the (House) subcommittee ... is never going to pass on the House floor," Harkin said. “When I talked to Chairman Peterson last week, he had some ideas, some modest reforms that seemed pretty good. **But obviously he got rolled. That's a shame.**”

What's the timeline for a new farm bill? Harkin says he's always wanted to get a new bill done by Sept. 30, 2007 and haven't given up on that yet. “I can still get this thing done by Sept. 30. But I'm not going to be rushed into it.”

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