

House proposal's conservation sections designed to attract farm and non-farm support

This week we will continue to look at some of the details of the farm bill legislation as it has been approved by the House Ag Committee. Partly it is a matter of identifying provisions that contribute to building the "coalition of interests" that Rep. Stenholm says will be needed to pass a new farm bill.

One thing to keep in mind is that it is early in the game and almost anything can happen before a final version of a farm bill is adopted. While the House Ag Committee has completed its version of the farm bill, it still has to get past the floor of the House and there are those who would like to take things off (such as sugar payments) or add things on (such as higher payment levels).

In addition, the Senate is not nearly as far along on a farm bill proposal and the leadership of the Senate's committee has recently switched from Republican to Democrat. If the bill that is reported out of the Senate Ag committee follows proposals made by its Chair, Tom Harkin, then its emphasis will be on conservation payments and energy production. That will mean the Senate bill and the House bill would be going in quite different directions. At that point it will be up to a Conference Committee to fashion a farm bill acceptable to both House interests and Senate interests. And you know the old saying, "A camel is a horse put together by a committee."

But right now, let's continue our discussion of the House's proposal, specifically the parts of the bill related to conservation.

The conservation section of the proposed legislation dedicates over \$16 billion during the 10 year life of the legislation to soil, water, and wildlife programs. This represents an additional \$7 billion over the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) April 2001 baseline expenditures. This level of spending should draw support from legislators whose constituents are concerned about environmental issues.

EQIP - Livestock producers, who—unlike program crop producers—receive no direct government payments, do find something to support in the conservation section of "The Farm Security Act of 2001." The proposed legislation reauthorizes the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) with \$1.2 billion in annual funding. Of that annual \$1.2 billion, fifty percent is reserved for livestock producers. The bulk of that money is targeted to address manure management issues. The limitation on the size of livestock operations eligible for EQIP is eliminated under the proposed legislation.

The swampbusting provisions of the previous legislation were amended to conform to the Highly-Erodible Lands provisions. Producers would be penalized for swampbusting only on the crop which was produced on converted land.

For the first time, non-industrial private forest land is specifically included in EQIP.

CRP - The proposed legislation reauthorizes the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) with a 39.2 million acre cap—up from the current 36.4 million acres. The

Secretary is authorized to permit the placement of wind turbines for generating energy, and biomass recovery (harvest) for energy production (with a conservation reserve payment reduction) on CRP lands. The Secretary is directed to restore crop base, contract acreage, quota or allotment history upon expiration of the CRP contract.

Part of this provision may also benefit some livestock producers. It authorizes—but does not require—the Secretary of Agriculture to allow managed grazing and limited haying on Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) acreage with a conservation reserve payment reduction.

WRP – The Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) is reauthorized through 2011 and the Secretary is given authority to enroll 150,000 acres of land into the WRP annually using easements, restoration cost share agreements or both. Unused acres may be rolled over to future years. Land that is enrolled in CRP or EQIP is ineligible to be enrolled in WRP.

WHIP – The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), which provides cost sharing for landowners to enhance wildlife habitat, is reauthorized at \$25 million annually.

FPP – The proposed legislation reauthorizes the Farmland Protection Program (FPP) at a level of \$50 million a year. It is expanded to include agricultural land that contains historic or archaeological resources.

Farmland Stewardship Program – A new chapter in the legislation establishes a Farmland Stewardship Program that is "designed to more precisely tailor and target existing conservation programs to the specific conservation needs and opportunities presented by individual parcels of eligible agricultural acreage." The bulk of the funds used in this program will come from other existing public and private conservation programs. The program seeks to achieve its goals through public/private partnerships.

Grassland Reserve – The House Ag Committee proposal authorizes 2 million acres in a Grassland Reserve Program to be enrolled in 10, 15, and 20 year contracts. One million acres of this shall be native grass and 1 million acres shall be restored grassland.

Small Watershed Rehabilitation Program – The proposed legislation amends existing law to provide \$15 million for the fiscal year 2002 and each succeeding fiscal year for small watershed rehabilitation projects.

In summary, the House farm bill proposal primarily reauthorizes and expands existing conservation programs. With minor exceptions like the Grassland Reserve Program and the Farmland Stewardship Program, the House bill does not veer too far from the conservation-related programs of the 1996 Farm Bill.

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