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Subject: Farm bill poised to be punted to lame duck

Farm bill poised to be punted to lame duck

By Helena Bottemiller Evich and Catherine Boudreau

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Leading farm bill negotiators are now openly acknowledging that they're looking to pass a conference report after the midterm elections in November.

With numerous issues left to resolve, from commodity policy to food stamps, it is now all but certain that the House and Senate won't clinch a deal in time to pass legislation before the current law expires at the end of the month.

Previously, the four principal agriculture lawmakers had been reticent to discuss punting to the lame-duck session — but that has changed, despite the political risk inherent in failing to meet the fast-approaching Sept. 30 deadline. The so-called Big Four are saying that an extension of current law is not on the table, meaning that some lawmakers on the campaign trail will have to answer questions next month about the blown deadline.

"I don't think we have the capability right now to get the scores we'd need to have, or to put this together in a way to be presented to conferees so they know what they're voting on at this point," Senate Agriculture Chairman [Pat Roberts](#) (R-Kan.) told reporters Wednesday afternoon, referring to scores by the Congressional Budget Office. "Whether we can get that done prior to the midterms, I think that's questionable."

Roberts said he hopes negotiations will progress so Congress can vote on a farm bill compromise during lawmakers' first week back after the midterms, though political realities on Capitol Hill could be different at that time. Agriculture lawmakers in both parties have been vocal about the need to pass a farm bill on time to provide producers with some certainty amid stubbornly low commodity prices and trade woes.

The four principals met for more than an hour on Wednesday morning, but reported no major progress after the huddle. Roberts told reporters that staff have "marching orders" to work on a number of issues, citing lingering disagreements over commodity policy, conservation and the forestry title.

House Agriculture Chairman [Mike Conaway](#) (R-Texas) said Wednesday that not a single farm bill title has been closed out.

Both chambers are scheduled to be in session over the next two weeks, but that could change in the House as members are eager to return to their districts to campaign. Conaway has said he is willing to return to Washington regardless of the House schedule to continue farm bill negotiations.

Pushing back the timeline for passing a new farm bill raises questions about how the political dynamics could alter farm bill talks if Republicans were to lose the House or the Senate in the midterms.

House Agriculture ranking member [Collin Peterson](#) (D-Minn.) reiterated this week that he does not want to write a farm bill next year, even if he's back in the chairman seat.

"I am the most adamant about getting this bill done," Peterson told POLITICO late Tuesday, adding that he'd just spoken to House Minority Leader [Nancy Pelosi](#) about the farm bill. "I don't want to take over the chairmanship and have to do a farm bill. I want it done now, and Roberts wants it done now. We're not the ones holding this up."

After Wednesday's meeting, the House and Senate Agriculture committees issued a joint statement along with a [photo](#), in an apparent effort to show that neither side has given up on the slow-going talks.

"Each of us is still at the negotiating table, and we remain committed to working together on a farm bill," the four lawmakers said in the statement. "Our conversations are productive, and progress toward an agreement is taking shape. We are going to get this right."

Behind the unified statement, however, tensions were simmering over who is to blame for the lack of compromise.

Conaway was asked what he would tell groups representing advocates of rural development and local and regional food systems, who have raised concerns about the fate of several so-called orphan programs. These programs will lose funding if Congress lets the farm bill expire. The USDA, without an extension, also won't be able to process or approve applications for major conservation programs.

"I'd tell those groups to call [Debbie Stabenow](#) and tell her to make a deal," Conaway said, referring to the Senate Agriculture ranking member from Michigan. He added that outside groups may be able to pressure Roberts and Stabenow in a way that he hasn't been able to.

Stabenow, when asked last week about the fate of orphan programs — many of which promote international trade, local food and bioenergy development — said only that they were important to the Senate.

Major differences between the House and Senate farm bills on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program have attracted most of the publicity, with House Republicans and President Donald Trump publicly pressing for stricter work requirements that are politically unfeasible in the Senate. But Stabenow and Conaway are dug in on other titles as well, according to Peterson, who said there were disagreements over commodity and energy policy and how to pay for various proposals.

"They want to take money from each other to pay for what the other one doesn't want," Peterson told POLITICO.

The House-passed farm bill, [H.R. 2 \(115\)](#), proposed changes to the commodity title that would add \$400 million over a decade to Price Loss Coverage, which predominantly covers crops like rice, peanuts, sorghum and wheat, and triggers subsidies when prices drop below levels set by Congress. Cotton growers — an important constituency for Conaway — became eligible for commodity supports in a budget deal enacted earlier this year and are anticipated to enroll in PLC.

The proposed boost to PLC would be paid for in part by eliminating commodity program payments for acres that weren't planted with an eligible crop between 2009 and 2017.

The Senate version, [S. 3042 \(115\)](#), would increase funds for the Agriculture Risk Program, which covers the majority of Midwestern corn and soybean growers. ARC is revenue-based, making payments when county profits drop below historical averages. The Senate farm bill found savings in the commodity title by ending an "economic adjustment assistance" program for the cotton industry, which the CBO [estimates](#) would cost about \$500 million over a decade.

Conaway and Roberts have acknowledged that issues related to those two commodity programs have yet to be resolved.

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