



## FARM BILL PLAYS PIVOTAL ROLE IN U.S. FOOD PRODUCTION

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*The U.S. Senate last week could not agree on a new version of the farm bill, an important piece of legislation that provides money for farmers but is also criticized for inflating food prices and contributing to corporate farming.*

The farm bill, which is renewed every five years, is a multi-billion dollar piece of legislation that doles out money for food stamps, farms and environmental conservation.

The latest version of the farm bill was passed in 2002 and without action by the Senate, those programs could disappear.

### **Slow going in 2007**

With crop prices high and the federal government facing a deficit, Republicans in the Senate have decided to battle the Democrats over the cost of the bill: \$286 billion.

The House of Representatives passed a version of the farm bill in July 2007, which has to be accepted by the Senate and then signed by the president to become law.

President Bush has threatened to veto this version of the bill, saying it is too expensive and pays wealthy farmers too much.

Republican and Democratic lawmakers from farm states have been unwilling to substantially cut subsidies to farmers -- especially wealthy landowners, who tend to be big political donors.

In the Senate, fighting began after Republicans proposed amendments concerning taxes and immigration, which have little to do with agriculture.

Sen. Tom Harkin, a Democrat from Iowa who chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee, speculated that the White House is pressuring Republicans to stop the bill because President Bush doesn't want to veto legislation that is so popular in farm states.

"I certainly hope the situation is not a deliberate, or orchestrated, attempt to stop the farm bill dead in its tracks, but I'm beginning to wonder," Harkin said, according to the Associated Press.

## **Crop controversy**

The most controversial part of the farm bill is the money it pays to farmers.

According to U.S. Department of Agriculture data, just 10 percent of all farmers, almost entirely in the Midwest, collect 62 percent of the taxpayer dollars.

The bill favors corn, wheat, soy, rice and cotton, which is good for big food companies, but punishes growers of healthier fruits and vegetables, critics argue.

"Shifting money from commodity subsidies to the other programs in the farm bill won't be easy. The farm lobby wields tremendous power while non-farm state politicians have typically ignored this law," Brian Halweil of Worldwatch Institute wrote in the New York Times.

## **History of the farm bill**

Congress first required the Department of Agriculture to provide support for U.S. farms after the Great Depression and World War I left many farmers struggling.

The Agricultural Adjustment Act of 1933 was one of the first pieces of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal legislation. It paid money directly to farmers not to grow certain crops so that it could control the supply of food and set a minimum price for the food that did come to the market.

Since then, the bill has been expanded to pay farmers to limit the amount of food being exported to other countries, which increases the price of the corn, wheat and other foods.

Food stamps, which appeal to politicians from urban areas, were added in 1977, quickly becoming the most expensive item in the bill. In the 2002 farm bill, food stamps accounted for \$178 of the \$271 billion total.

During the 1980s, the farm bill started to include provisions on environmental conservation, including incentives to preserve wetlands, other wildlife areas and to make farms more environmentally friendly.

## **Farming in the future**

While it is likely that a new farm bill will pass eventually, the fight in Congress highlights how the legislation and the business of farming has changed in size and scope over the past seven decades.

*-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra*

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