

Can The Farm Bill Stand Alone Without Food Stamps?



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When Congress returns in November to achieve either full passage of a 2012 farm bill or extend farm policies into next year, critics of the food stamp program, costing almost \$800 billion over the next 10 years, are letting folks know that

they would like to see bigger cuts to the mammoth feeding program. Many of them call for cutting the historical ties that have long-connected farm subsidies and food programs.

Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Ind., in conjunction with Heritage Action CEO Michael Needham, wrote in an opinion piece earlier this fall that "it's time for a farm only farm bill."

"For decades, an unholy Washington alliance between rural lawmakers and their urban and suburban colleagues has caused exponential growth in spending by combining farm policy and food stamps in one huge legislative package," they said. "It's a practice our nation can no longer afford as we approach \$16 trillion in debt."

Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kans., echoed much the same sentiment when he opposed the House Agriculture Committee's final version of the farm bill, which cut more than \$16 billion from SNAP, while noting that "I voted 'no' as this is no longer a Farm Bill." Last month, Huelskamp and other members of the Republican Study Committee, introduced a bill to combine the six food programs in the Farm Bill into a single block grant to states.

In the Democrat-controlled Senate, the farm bill passed with a bipartisan 64-35 vote, with food stamps reduced by \$4.5 billion. Sen. Ron Johnson, R-Wisc., proposed a motion during the floor debate to recommit the bill so SNAP could be separated and the remaining 20 percent of the farm bill's spending could be considered as the farm bill. The motion failed 59-40.

"The Farm Bill is misnamed," Johnson said. "It's a Food Stamp Bill that gives our agricultural concerns an honorable mention. That's wrong and farmers deserve a clean bill that addresses our agricultural needs." But, he said, "Harry Reid and the Democrats refuse to do that."

Opposition to an association with the food stamp or Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) begs the larger question: Would it be possible, in a Congress dominated by urban dwellers, to find 218 votes for passing a bill devoted only to helping farmers?

Until the 1960's, farm bills passed with the commodity title making up the majority of the legislation. However, when Congress became increasingly urban and suburban, agricultural representatives incorporated the pilot program for food stamps into farm policy in order to win the majority of votes.

The initial food stamp program, made permanent in 1964, took surplus food items and found a way to distribute them to help farmers and provide assistant to needy individuals, said Roger Szemraj, agriculture and nutrition expert and counsel at OFW Law. Given that the program involved surplus food removal, the ability to administer that program went through USDA, which led to the creation of the Food and Nutrition Service in the 1970s.

"Ever since inception of food programs, there's always been a linkage between farm products and food assistance," which is why the program wound up at USDA and became authorized in the farm bill, said Szemraj. Today, there are far fewer farmers and fewer congressional districts in rural areas, he said, and the food stamp portion of the farm bill creates a reason for urban representatives to support the legislation.

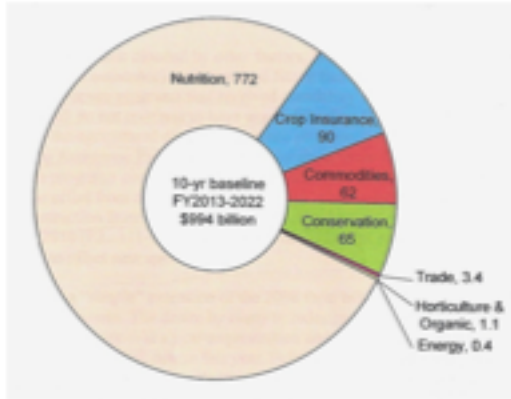
House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., recognizes the farm bill

as a three-legged stool of commodity programs, nutrition and conservation.

"I don't know that we can pass a commodity title freestanding, by itself, in the world we deal in right now here in the nation's capital," he said in an Agri-Talk interview this summer.

In the third and final presidential debate Monday night, Republican candidate Mitt Romney said he plans to reduce food stamp spending, "not by cutting food stamps" but by creating new jobs. But whether or not Romney is elected, House Republicans who say they were sent to Congress to control government spending dislike passing a \$1 trillion bill. When 80 percent of that bill is SNAP, that's where they'll look for savings, noted a former House Agriculture Committee staffer.

"This is a fight over a trillion dollar bill," said the former staffer, who wished to remain anonymous. "The only place to make deep cuts is in



The farm expenditure "pie": FY 2013 Senate Ag Comm. Baseline. CBO 1-12 Update from CRS

the food stamps. Democrats won't support the cuts, so there are not enough votes either way you go."

Some say if SNAP is separated from the farm bill, the House would still pass the remaining titles, albeit with amendments and spending sacrifices. But former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman disagrees. The coalitions between farm and food groups developed beginning with the late Sen. George McGovern and former Sen. Bob Dole in the 1970s "have been in large part responsible for the health of both farm and nutrition legislation," Glickman told *Agri-Pulse*.

Dole wrote in a *Washington Post* editorial on McGovern's passing that "we would both come to understand that our most important commonality the one that would unite us during and after our service on Capitol Hill was our shared desire to eliminate hunger in this country and around the world."

Glickman explained that separating food stamps from farm policy after decades of collaboration would be a disservice to both sectors. "You will have such a small percentage of the Congress representing farm and rural areas that you'll get a farm bill passed, but it would be a shell of its current levels," Glickman said. "So I think if we split them off then it will probably be the end of farm bills as we know it," he said.

While SNAP makes the overall baseline for the farm bill significantly larger, Dale Moore, the deputy executive director of public policy at American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), said that different budget functions exist for the nutrition programs than the farm programs, which are even overseen by different branches of the White House Office of Management and Budget.

However, Moore said that the "fear of unknown is if we take SNAP out of farm programs and that baseline out of the debate, then do we have enough votes and political will to actually get a farm bill passed?"

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