

Is The Timing Right For A New Version Of 'Freedom To Farm?'

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WASHINGTON, D.C.

Relatively high commodity prices, huge federal budget deficits, and the realization that agriculture will have to contribute to deficit reduction. These three factors framed the political landscape back in 1995, when lawmakers inked historic changes in farm policy,

officially known as the Federal Agricultural Improvement and Reform Act (FAIR).

For farm bill "veterans" like Sen. Pat Roberts (R-Kansas) the political environment in 2011 may seem eerily familiar. As the House Agriculture Committee chairman from 1995-1997, Roberts led the reform of federal farm policies in a budget cutting environment, producing a new farm bill that was widely heralded as "Freedom to Farm" and panned by others as "Freedom to Fail."

Under Title I, the Agricultural Market Transition Act, farmers were able to enter into production flexibility contracts and plant 100 percent of their total contract acreage to any crop except fruits and vegetables and receive a full payment. The switch represented a major change from past policies that coupled payments to market prices and specific production decisions.

One major difference between then and now is that Republicans controlled both the House and the Senate and three Kansans played major roles in crafting farm policy: Roberts, Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole and Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman.

"Myth has it that this was a Republican farm bill," says Kansas State University Economist Barry Flinchbaugh. "That argument can be made, but Secretary Glickman supported it and President Clinton signed it."

Tough times, tough changes?

The similarities between that time period and now have been prompting several policy types to talk about the need for another historic change in farm policy, one that takes a longer term view of the challenges and opportunities facing production agriculture. However, Sen. Roberts, who now serves as the Ranking Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, says it is still too early to look at specific changes.

The folks out in farm country know that we have to quit spending money we don't have, says Roberts. When it comes to trimming the federal budget, "agriculture will do our part. Our plea is that we let the Agriculture Committees and those of us who understand the policy issues.... do that job from a policy standpoint."

"One of the things I learned in 1995 is that

when people adhere to a specific (budget) number it may sound pretty goodbut we made the cuts. We tried to consider policy as well as a specific number."

Asked if farm and commodity organizations should be providing lawmakers with specific programs to cut, Roberts says he would urge them to "keep their powder dry" and would urge the committee to do the same, "to the extent that they can."

"There is no reason for them to jump the gun and say I'm going to jump on a sword or whatever that might be in terms of a cut . . . I don't want to get into internecine warfare between commodity groups and farm organizations" with some groups claiming programs of value to them are being cut for the benefit of other groups. "We've seen that in the past and it's not been productive."

When you look at the safety net, including crop insurance, direct payments, countercyclical payments and then the Average Crop Revenue Election (ACRE), Roberts says farm groups might want to make modifications. But he adds, "It's premature to play one off against the other or say I'll use one as a bank so I can get more of this."

Roberts has been meeting almost every week with Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich, to discuss top issues confronting the industry and prepare for the 2012 Farm bill. Most of their focus thus far has been on trying to rein in regulators.

"We are listening to our farmers and ranchers who ask: 'What on earth are you doing back there in Washington, saddling us with all of these regulations?'" Roberts said. After meeting with Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack and EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, Roberts says the committee staff has pulled together a working group, along with USDA and EPA, to address "some of the most egregious things we have to put up with in farm country right now."

Although no timeline has been established, Roberts says he and Chairman Stabenow plan to hold farm bill hearings in Washington and around the country. "Once we get that done, we'll see how much money we have." Roberts said he is "a great believer in hearings," adding that "there isn't a farm hearing I've been to that some light bulb didn't go off in my head and I've said, 'Gee, why haven't I thought of that before?'"

The entire process could play out over the next several months. Roberts warns, "To move quickly would not be as wise as waiting to see where we are with the budget, what we learn at the hearings and then to move accordingly." Δ

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