

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



April 29, 2023

Farm Bill Discussion

Two weeks ago I joined a small delegation of Kentucky Extension Agents in Washington D.C. for a national extension conference. Our objective was to learn more about the public issues across the country and how the Cooperative Extension Service is involved in addressing these issues within their respective states. The third day in D.C. was set aside for time on Capitol Hill where we had appointments with most of the Kentucky congressional offices' staff and both Senate offices. We had the opportunity to share some of the extension activities occurring across the state and within each specific congressional district. Much of the conversation in those meetings pertained to the farm bill.

The farm bill is a 5-year program. The current farm bill, passed in 2018 expires on September 30 this year. As we know from discussion in the news concerning federal spending, there is apprehension concerning the early congressional budget office cost estimates for the 2023 farm bill. The 2018 farm bill passed relatively easily. It was pre-pandemic, so no major increases to nutrition program spending were requested. The commodity prices were up, so despite the possibility of farm subsidy payments, there was low expectation they would be triggered, causing the budgeted funds to be dispersed. The third popular aspect of the 2018 farm bill included language allowing commercial hemp to be grown in every state.

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

The farm bill forecasts spending for 10 years despite being only a 5-year legislation. In 2023, we have an economy slowly recovering from the pandemic, continued strength in commodity prices, price inflation of SNAP-eligible food items, and more people qualifying for SNAP benefits. When combined, those factors have the nutrition title forecast to compose 84.5% of the 2023 farm bill compared to 76.5% of the 2018 farm bill. In fact, the 2023 farm bill 10-year expense is forecast to exceed one trillion for the first time ever. The total amount budgeted is \$1.4 trillion, \$1.2 trillion of which is in the nutrition title. The 2018 farm bill forecast spending \$867 billion over the 10-year period, with \$663 billion in the nutrition title.

Approval of this level of funding, specifically for the nutrition title of the farm bill, is certain to be used as leverage for other congressional requests concerning federal spending and deficit reduction. While most of the congressional staff we met with were optimistic the farm bill would be passed on time, all indicated it would be discussed up until the final minutes before approval. One office even suggested it might not be approved for a long time, as was the case with the farm bill that expired in 2012. The congressional leadership and presidential administration at that time could not agree and that bill was repeatedly extended over the next two years until the new bill was finally agreed upon in 2014.

To boil the farm bill down, there are four primary categories it provides. The first category being a farm safety net. The core agricultural leadership wish to maintain a risk management focus with crop insurance and countercyclical support with subsidies. Countercyclical is an economics term meaning to counteract the fluctuations of an economic cycle. They wish to improve and expand crop insurance and revisit price support levels of support in the countercyclical measures. The second category is trade, with a goal to increase

MESSENGER-INQUIRER

support to market development and market access programs. The third category is conservation, in which the goal is to prioritize voluntary conservation, cap CRP enrollments, and favor cost share for sustainable practice adoption. The fourth, and by far the largest category of the farm bill is nutrition. The goal of Congress is to maintain the nutrition titles as part of the farm bill and to advance domestic food security and food access through SNAP and related programs.

The question often arises about why the nutrition title remains in the farm bills. It was explained best to me by a previous staffer on the House Agriculture Committee. She explained that keeping the nutrition title in the farm bill was the only way to ever get it passed in Congress. With nutrition included, the senators and representatives from rural, agricultural districts and senators and representatives from the urban areas will all support and vote for it.

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