

The future of the 2012 U.S. Farm Bill still looked uncertain going into the Thanksgiving holiday break, a spokesperson for the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition & Forestry said.



The key legislative tool for U.S. food and agriculture provides mandatory funding for nutrition, rural development, conservation, research and farm commodity programs.

The bill comes up for vote every five years. On Sep. 30, the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008 expired, leaving 37 programs that oversee conservation, rural development and local food production, among other areas, without a budget baseline.

Jeremy Peters, director of federal policy at American Farmland Trust, explained the political complications that have pushed the bill into the lame duck session, the congressional period wedged between election day and inauguration.

"There's a whole backlog of legislation that needs to get done, especially pertaining to fiscal policy, some different tax bills that need to be done," Peters said.

"We've got this whole budget sequester that the Congress passed earlier that if something isn't done, there's an across the board cut to programs that will go into effect at the first of the year, so they've got to do something."

Congress is expected to stay in session until Dec. 21, leaving less than a month to address a long list of items after it returns tomorrow. Legislation left unresolved will be forced back to square one when the new Congress meets again in January.

"One of the biggest drivers in the next Congress will be the loss of budget baseline for the Farm Bill. The congressional budget office will have a new baseline some time in March and it's expected that that baseline will be smaller than the existing farm bill baseline because

we've already had a number of programs that have expired," he said.

As of now, the bill has been approved by the full Senate and has passed through the House committee. The bill still needs full House approval, however, and to have inconsistencies between the Senate and House bills resolved.

If passed before the session closes, the new bill will contain between US\$23 billion and US\$35 billion in savings. It will also restore mandatory funding to 14 to 26 of the programs currently in limbo.

Time and politics will be the bill's main adversaries.

Although the bill has received bipartisan support, the trick is finding a balance with budget cuts.

"The hold up has been this kind of divide within the Republican caucus where part of the Republican caucus is comfortable with what the agriculture committee has done. And you've got this Tea Party wing of the caucus that wants to go substantially further. So that's created a problem for the leadership where they don't want to have a vote and expose a rift that exists within their caucus," he said.

Nutrition programs, such as food stamps and supplemental assistance, account for the greatest portion of the bill, making them a focal point of debate.

"Really what they're faced with is getting a centrist coalition together. You're going to lose some Democrats because the nutrition cuts go too far. You're going to lose some Republicans because the nutrition cuts don't go far enough. So what their challenged with is finding this middle group of votes that understand the bigger picture," Peters said.

Despite budget tensions, however, Peters explained that there is a desire to pass the bill soon.

"There are farm state Democrats and Republicans that want a bill, obviously for their constituencies. The urban vote, of course, wants the nutrition program because their constituents are heavily affected by the availability of nutrition programs, feeding the urban poor. There's a wide variety of reasons why the Democrats and Republicans both have an interest in the bill passing," he said.

As for the agriculture industry, the time for action is now.

"A lot of the farm and commodity organizations are saying, you know, this is really the best deal we're going to get. It's not going to get better next year. In fact, we're probably going to be asked to cut more next year. The prevailing view among agricultural groups is, let's go ahead and get this done and avoid an even larger problem next year," he said.

Even with a rough road ahead, Peters said he remains hopeful. Opportunity still exists for the lame duck Congress to come to a resolution.

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