

# Senate Agriculture panel approves farm bill

By Erik Wasson - 05/14/13 01:42 PM ET

The Senate Agriculture Committee on Tuesday approved a five-year farm bill in a 15-5 vote.

The markup of the \$955 billion five-year farm bill featured fights over food stamps and price-based farm subsidies, but a bipartisan coalition beat back all major changes to the draft text, which is expected to reach the Senate floor next week.

Four Republicans voted against the bill: Sens. Pat Roberts (Kan.), Mitch McConnell (Ky.), Mike Johanns (Neb.) and John Thune (S.D.). Liberal Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) also voted "no."

Lawmakers hope to enact the measure before the extended 2008 farm bill expires on Sept. 30.

The bill, written by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.) and ranking member Thad Cochran (R-Miss.), would cut \$23 billion from the deficit over 10 years.

But \$4 billion of those cuts would come from the food stamp program, a move that has raised opposition from some Democratic senators.

The low level of defection in committee bodes well for the floor fight, Stabenow said after the panel's vote.

She predicted this year's farm bill would enjoy similarly strong support to last year's, which passed the Senate on a 64-35 vote.

"I am absolutely confident we will see a strong vote," she said.

Legislation never made it to the White House last year because House Republican leaders refused to bring their chamber's farm bill to the floor, partly for fear rank-and-file conservatives would balk at the bill for what they'd see as insufficient budget cuts.

This year's House farm bill includes deeper cuts to food stamps, which could increase support from conservatives — though the \$20.5 billion cut will spark opposition from liberals.

During the Senate panel markup on Tuesday, Gillibrand presented but withdrew an amendment to replace the Senate's food stamp cuts with reductions to crop insurance programs. Her measure drew support from Sens. Mo Cowan (D-Mass.) and Sherrod Brown (D-Ohio).

"I believe that we should not be balancing the deficit on the backs of Americans who are just hungry," Gillibrand said.

But other liberals on the committee, including Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa), indicated they would support the Stabenow cuts, which supporters say would decrease abuse of the food stamp system.

“We crack down on abuses in the system without attacking the basic structure of support that many families have needed to get themselves through this tough economy,” Stabenow said. Her changes would make it more difficult for states to sign up individuals for food stamps based on their use of heating aid.

Democrats were able to beat back attempts by GOP members to cut food stamps further.

Johanns offered an amendment to eliminate categorical eligibility for food stamps to save \$11 billion. The provision — included in the House draft farm bill — was defeated.

“We are a moral country that does not want people to go hungry,” a passionate Gillibrand argued.

Thune offered an amendment to strengthen work requirements for able-bodied adults on food stamps, but his measure was defeated on voice vote.

The bill also shifts farm subsidies away from direct payments to farmers and toward expanded crop insurance. But unlike last year’s failed legislation, it would not completely do away with target-price supports favored by rice and peanut farmers.

Roberts, along with Johanns and Thune, led attempts to scale back some of those price supports from the bill during markup.

A key amendment by Thune to remove price supports for all but rice and peanuts was defeated on a voice vote. The northern plains Republicans argued that soybean, corn and wheat farmers do not want the support, and that the subsidies will be successfully challenged in the World Trade Organization as trade distorting. Such a finding could close off valuable export markets for key commodities.

“[A]s it stands at this point today, this is not a reform bill,” Roberts said. “Target prices under any name ... are government subsidies which are proved to be trade and market distorting.”

Price supports are paid out when market prices fall below a set target level. The new farm bill raises prices for commodities in a way that will tend to increase payouts to farmers.

Johanns offered an amendment to reduce target prices for rice and peanuts to 2008 levels, saving \$1.5 billion. It was defeated on a voice vote.

Cochran defended his effort to reinstate price supports.

“We have tried to be fair to those affected by the bill as well as those who pay the bills,” said Cochran, who was backed by Sens. Saxby Chambliss (R-Ga.) and John Boozman (R-Ark.).

Cochran said after the markup that the day was a victory for Mississippi.

The farm subsidy cuts in the bill are less than what President Obama has called for, but Stabenow cautioned that rural America could not bear more budget cuts.

“Agriculture has been willing to do more than its part — from the supercommittee process to the farm bill we passed last year,” she said.

The Senate bill’s cuts, however, are dwarfed by those in the House, which would cut \$39.7 billion over 10 years. The House will begin markup on its bill, to cut food stamps by \$20.5 billion, on Wednesday.