

INITIAL CONGRESSIONAL “LISTENING SESSION” FOR 2018 FARM BILL SCHEDULED FOR FLORIDA



By
Richard M. Blau

GRAY | **ROBINSON**
ATTORNEYS AT LAW

The Agriculture Committee of the U.S. House of Representatives announced the first of several committee activities across the country intended to stimulate conversation and gather input from farmers, ranchers and stakeholders. “*The Next Farm Bill, Conversations in the Field,*” is an effort by the Ag Committee to stimulate conversation and gather input from farmers, ranchers and agriculture stakeholders. The program was announced by House Agriculture Committee Chairman K. Michael Conaway (R-TX) and Ranking Member Collin Peterson (D-MN), and will involve a series of committee listening sessions conducted across America.

The inaugural listening session will take place in Gainesville, Florida on June 24, 2017. “*When it comes to writing farm bills, the House Agriculture Committee has a long history of getting out of Washington and speaking with the folks these policies are intended to serve. I’m looking forward to these events, and I encourage farmers, ranchers and other stakeholders to join us,*” said Congressman Conaway.

Members of the Agriculture Committee and their staffers are likely to get an earful from constituents, as many important issues are on the table for this 2018 Farm bill. Among the key subjects identified by ag policy makers:

1. THE FUTURE OF THE SNAP/FOOD STAMP PROGRAM.

Chairman Conaway will likely hold more hearings on the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). During the debates over the last farm bill, efforts were made by Republicans to reduce the SNAP budget by \$20 billion; although that effort failed mainly along party lines, Republicans now control both houses of Congress as well as the Presidency.

The countervailing concern is that more than 43 million Americans receive food through SNAP, the same program the White House [hopes to cut by 25 percent](#) over the next decade by tightening

work requirements for food stamp eligibility. Anti-hunger advocates contend [SNAP already has a work requirement](#). Able-bodied adults without dependents are required to work or take part in education, job-training, or “workfare” programs; those who do not meet these requirements will be dropped from the program after three months. Looking at SNAP recipients as a whole, relevant data indicate the vast majority of SNAP beneficiaries either are working or not expected to work because they are children, elderly, or disabled.

2. CROP INSURANCE ADJUSTMENTS.

currently, farmers pay 38% of crop insurance premiums, with the federal government underwriting the remaining 62%. There likely will be efforts to make cuts in the federal government’s share of support, or in the program altogether.

One area that may be targeted is the Harvest Price Option (HPO). This coverage provides protection on lost production at the higher of either (i) the price projected just before planting time, or (ii) the price at harvest. Farmers who forward-contract a share of their crop before harvest commonly use it. One consideration that may help preserve the HPO is that it is a public-private partnership. PPP concepts appear to be especially favored by the Trump administration.

3. AG CUTS IN THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION’S PROPOSED BUDGET.

The Trump administration’s budget did include 21% in cuts in discretionary spending for USDA. While much about the proposed budget has stirred great public debate, Washington insiders are quick to note that it is Congress, not the President, that holds the purse strings and legislates the federal budget. Still, President Trump and his base are likely to have their influence felt as the Farm bill deliberations move forward. Other administration priorities require funding, and that money has to come from somewhere.

Still, many members of Congress, especially those in the Republican majority, are looking for major cuts to federal agriculture spending. For example, during the 2014 Farm Bill debate, Representative Jeff Fortenberry (R-NE) sponsored a measure that would have capped farm commodity payments at \$250,000 per year for any one farm. It failed, 195 to 234. Nor is this a only a Republican-risk; a measure cosponsored by Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL) to reduce crop insurance premium subsidies by 15% for individuals or legal entities with over \$750,000 adjusted gross income also failed in 2014, with many observers believing the Durbin amendment will resurface in 2018.

4. SUPPORT FOR THE NEXT GENERATION OF AMERICA’S FAMILY FARMERS.

Millennial farmers and members of the National Young Farmers Coalition ([NYFC](#)) are at the forefront of a movement to focus Congress on key issues for young farmers in the 2018 Farm Bill. Lindsey Lusher Shute, the co-founder and executive director of NYFC, recently was quoted as saying that “[u]nless we tackle affordable land, student debt and health care now, few of these young farmers and ranchers will make agriculture a lifelong career.” With two-thirds of our farmland ready to transition to a new generation, next-generation advocates will be looking for 2018 Farm Bill provisions

Examples of specific 2018 Farm Bill reforms sought by younger farmers and ranchers include: (i) prioritizing conservation easements that protect farmland affordability within the Agricultural

Land Easement (ALE) Program's National ranking criteria; (ii) expanding and improving training programs for new farmers, such as the Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program (BFRDP) overseen by the USDA; (iii) making FSA loan programs more effective in terms of working for young and beginning farmers by reducing the direct farm ownership loan experience requirement from three years down to two years; (iv) granting USDA the authority to increase the loan limits for direct farm ownership loans in areas of the country with higher real estate prices; (v) appropriating substantial funding for beginning farmer and rancher Individual Development Accounts to help young and beginning farmers and ranchers save money by matching funds that they put into a savings account for ag expenditures, and help them become successful entrepreneurs by requiring business planning courses to better manage their ag operations (the 2008 Farm Bill authorized a matched savings program for beginning farmers, but Congress never funded the program); and (vi) promoting conservation easements with affordability language and succession planning in Purchase of Agricultural Conservation Easement (PACE) funding.

5. TRADE POLICY CHANGES.

Most agricultural interests were disappointed that one of the first actions taken by President Donald Trump was to cancel the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). The current administration apparently is redirecting focus from Asia to existing trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) that have an established process for renegotiation.

A considerable component of President Trump's campaign, and post-election rhetoric, has involved the concept of "renegotiating bad trade deals." Administration representatives have stated that disputes over topics such as biotechnology, intellectual property transfers or phytosanitary standards have to be based on established scientific standards. Whether, and how those negotiations proceed may have a direct impact on 2018 Farm Bill negotiations.

Members of the press interested in attending the House Agriculture Committee's Florida listening session should contact [Rachel Millard](#) for more details.