



MARK KULAW — NORTHWEST FLORIDA DAILY NEWS VIA ASSOCIATED PRESS

A farmer harvests cotton in Wing, Ala., in October. Conflict over the farm bill among commodity producers has pitted cotton and rice lobbyists against corn and soybean producers.

Infighting Among Commodities Imperils Farm Bill

Lucas: 'Coalition has broken down'

By DAVID ROGERS

As House-Senate talks resume Wednesday, the bad blood among rival commodity groups is becoming an embarrassment for farm bill advocates and a threat to getting legislation through Congress this winter.

Cotton and rice recently took a shot at corn and soybeans in a letter about proposed payment limits in both bills. Corn and beans went directly after House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.) last week — threatening to kill the farm bill and seek a two-year extension that would run past his tenure as chairman.

If J.P. Morgan had written such a letter to a tax-writing chairman in Congress, it would have stirred an immense fuss. But given the poor state of affairs in the farm world, the corn-and-beans threats drew little notice.

"The traditional coalition has broken down," Lucas told POLITICO. And to a surprising degree, commodity groups are instead picking sides between Lucas and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Mich.).

Even sugar seems split. Southern cane growers showed up Monday at a House strategy meeting in the Capitol basement even as sugar beet growers remain leery of challenging Stabenow.

"This has gotten out of hand, and it doesn't need to be," said Randy Russell, a veteran agriculture lobbyist.

"This is not helping to get a farm bill," said Rep. Collin Peterson (D-Minn.), one of the four principal negotiators and the House chairman when the most recent farm bill was enacted five years ago. "I didn't have this in 2008. The attitude among the commodity groups this time seems to be: Line up and shoot."

At one level, farm bill infighting among rival commodity interests is nothing new. But the bad blood and distrust now are exceptional. "I do think it's worse," said Reece Langley, representing the rice industry. And no single umbrella group seems strong enough to pull the factions back together.

Most important, perhaps, all this comes at a time when agriculture is already caught in a downward political spiral in Congress.

Indeed, unlike the last two farm bills, Lucas and Stabenow have significantly less money for the commodity title. The House

has already defeated one farm bill this past summer. And the talks now are focused on how to reconcile two competing visions of a new farm safety net to replace the current system of direct cash payments to producers.

In this context, the continued infighting is not just bloody — it could prove self-defeating.

As a rule, commodity organizations can be highly expert, sophisticated in their focus on the economics of their crop. But they often seem to operate in their own shrinking parallel universe — out of touch with Congress itself.

Lobbies like the National Corn Growers Association and American Soybean Association are more dominant than ever given the huge expansion of planted acres for the two crops in the past decade. But as farming becomes more concentrated and rural districts disappear in the House, the real vote-getting power of any of these commodity lobbies is diminished.

In Wednesday's meeting, Stabenow is expected to outline a full-fledged Senate framework in response to Lucas. But it's almost certain the new farm bill will include two options in its commodity title: a Senate plan geared to revenues, a House alternative keyed more to production costs.

Both promise to save money, but each has run into trouble for insisting that farmers be paid on what they actually plant — not according to the artificial "base acre" formula used now for direct payments.

For many House lawmakers, this is a necessary reform to make the subsidies more open and defensible to their urban colleagues. But it has run square into fears that all government aid be "decoupled" from planted acres to avoid World Trade Organization complaints.

The NCGA and ASA, with big export markets, are most insistent on this point and offered a series of alternatives to try to bridge this gap. But inevitably these resemble some version of the same discredited "base acre" approach — and are open to distortions as well, critics say.

Their tough-talking letter, dated Nov. 26, is addressed to all four of the principal negotiators: Lucas, Stabenow, Peterson and Sen. Thad Cochran (R-Miss.). But Lucas is the primary target because he has been most insistent on target prices as a means to protect farmers if markets collapse.

Moreover, by suggesting a full two-year extension of current farm programs, NCGA and ASA were seen as running out the clock

on Lucas's chairmanship, which is slated to end with this Congress a year from now.

Russell described the letter as "nothing short of a threat." Lucas was more guarded, given the sensitivity of the talks at this stage.

"If a tactical approach is to wait out a chairman to get a different outcome, then I think that is unfortunate," Lucas told POLITICO. "Let's just say I appreciated all the nuances that were involved in the logic of putting it together."

Both lobbies, when questioned by POLITICO, seemed to soften their tone, at least.

"We certainly didn't intend it to be a threat," said Danny Murphy, a Mississippi farmer and president of ASA. "We remain hopeful that the conference can reach an agreement that adequately addresses corn growers' policy concerns and that an extension will not be necessary," said Sam Willett of the NCGA.

"For some folks to believe they don't have to be part of the family anymore makes it a little difficult," Lucas said. "As chairman, I'm kind of like a parent sitting at the table. I'm trying to make sure everybody gets their fair portion as the plates go around. I'm trying to make sure the biggest kid doesn't shove all the little kids off the bench."