

GOP ditches farm bill extension

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Facing certain defeat, Republicans pulled their one-year farm bill extension from the House docket late Tuesday in favor of a narrower \$383 million disaster aid package to address the immediate needs of drought-stricken livestock producers.

The abrupt turnaround came just minutes before the House Rules Committee had been slated to take up the extension in anticipation of floor votes Wednesday. Within hours, the slimmer 22-page disaster bill had been filed with the promise of floor votes Thursday.

The action shows how much the GOP leadership — having boxed itself in by refusing to take up a five-year farm bill — is scrambling now to find something the party's candidates can take home to farm states in August given the severe drought plaguing much of the country.

The substitute will restore livestock indemnity and forage programs that have expired in the current farm program, with some assistance also for specialty crops.

To keep down costs, the aid will apply only to 2012, while offsets will come from imposing caps on two conservation programs much as the House Appropriations Committee has already proposed in its 2013 budget bill. Early estimates indicate the net savings would be about \$256 million.

“My priority remains to get a five-year farm bill on the books and put those policies in place,” said House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R-Okla.). “But the most pressing business before us is to provide disaster assistance to those producers impacted by the drought conditions who are currently exposed.”

“The House is expected to consider a disaster assistance package on Thursday and I encourage my colleagues to support it. ... The challenges our farmers and ranchers are currently facing only underscores how important it is that we complete a five-year farm bill this year.”

As this week began, the leadership was still talking boldly of going forward with the extension — but the odds only grew longer by the hour.

Stepping into the debate Tuesday morning, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack dismissed the extension as “just an excuse not to put in the work to build a coalition” needed for a long-term plan for producers but also all of “rural America.”

“We need a five-year bill,” Vilsack told POLITICO. “If folks care about rural America they will get this done.”

The “rural America” theme is one that the former Iowa governor has sounded before, emphasizing the economic development, energy and land conservation elements of the farm bills. And with Iowa in play in the presidential campaign—not to mention Vilsack’s wife, Christie, running for Congress back home against Republican Rep. Steve King—the farm bill’s import can no longer be ignored.

Vilsack upped the ante himself, saying that rural communities can survive the drought but that their economic turnaround could be seriously hurt by the stalemate in Congress.

“Production agriculture is the linchpin,” Vilsack said, but the “total package” is driven by “the natural resources of rural America” whether in recreational lands, bio-fuels or new manufacturing.

“We have the momentum now,” he said. “It’s taken a long time to get it, but they could kill it if there is no five-year farm bill.”

Leaders of the House and Senate Ag Committees had met Tuesday morning to try to find a path forward. But Minnesota Rep. Collin Peterson, the ranking Democrat on the House panel, refused to accept the extension absent a promise from Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) to allow House-Senate negotiations in August on the larger five-year farm plans favored by the two committees.

The Senate approved its farm bill in June, but Boehner has blocked House action for fear of a messy fight dividing his party. Instead, the speaker prevailed on Lucas to move ahead last Friday with the one-year extension together with disaster aid.

House Majority Whip Kevin McCarthy (R-Calif.), who has major agricultural interests in his own home district, reached out to Peterson over the weekend. “They are beginning to figure out that this is a big albatross and want to get it off their back,” Peterson told POLITICO.

Major commodity groups backed Peterson, and he was helped too by his friendship with Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.). There had been concern that liberal food stamp advocates would back the extension—since it spared nutrition programs. But Pelosi’s close ally, Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.), joined in opposition to the bill Tuesday making it harder to the GOP to get to a majority.

“If we really want to help producers hurt by the drought, we would do so with a clean bill,” DeLauro wrote her colleagues. “I urge you to oppose this shell extension.”

As his statement indicates, Lucas himself wants to move ahead with a five-year bill and has been put in a difficult spot by his leadership. Friday’s unveiling was more haphazard than is the chairman’s style. His typically close working relationship with Peterson is showing some strains. And despite the fact that Lucas included substantial disaster aid in his extension, it met a steady drumbeat of complaints from the right and left.

Fiscal conservatives and taxpayer groups were upset that the bill walked away from earlier promises to end costly direct cash payments to farmers. Environmentalists were agitated by the fact that the greatest share of the cuts to pay for the disaster aid would come from conservation programs.

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