Farm Bill Would Cut Food Stamps by $800M

MARY CLARE JALONICK, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Farm-state lawmakers are pushing for final passage of the massive, five-year farm bill as it heads to the House floor Wednesday — member by member, vote by vote.

There are goodies scattered through the bill for members from all regions of the country: a boost in money for crop insurance popular in the Midwest; higher cotton and rice subsidies for Southern farmers; renewal of federal land payments for Western states. There are cuts to the food stamp program — $800 million a year, or around 1 percent — for Republicans who say the program is spending too much money, but they are low enough that some Democrats will support them.

Negotiators on the final deal also left out a repeal of a catfish program that would have angered Mississippi lawmakers and language that would have thwarted a California law requiring all eggs sold in the state to come from hens living in larger cages. Striking out that provision was a priority for California lawmakers who did not want to see the state law changed.

House passage of the farm bill, which would spend almost $100 billion a year and would save around $2.3 billion annually, isn't certain. But farm-state lawmakers have been working for more than two years to strike just the right balance to get the massive bill passed as congressional compromise has been rare.

Hoping to put the bill past them and build on a budget deal passed earlier this month, House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., endorsed the bill Monday. Both said they would like to see more reform but are encouraging colleagues to vote for it anyway.

The House Agriculture Committee chairman, Rep. Frank Lucas, R-Okla., who has been working on the bill since 2011, said late Monday that it was "nothing short of a miracle that we're at this point."

Lucas and his Senate counterpart, Sen. Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., have touted the bill's overall savings and the elimination of a $4.5 billion-a-year farm subsidy called direct payments, which are now paid to farmers whether they farm or not. The bill would continue to heavily subsidize major crops — corn, soybeans, wheat, rice and cotton — while shifting many of those subsidies toward more politically defensible insurance programs. That means farmers would have to incur losses before they received a payout.

Still unclear, though, was how Republicans would get the votes they needed to pass the final bill on the House floor. The full House rejected an earlier version of the farm bill in June after conservative Republicans said cuts to food stamps weren't big enough — and that bill had more than two times the cuts than those in the

compromise bill announced Monday. A bill the House passed in September with strong conservative support would have made even larger cuts to the program.

Some of those conservatives were certain to oppose the scaled-back cuts to food stamps, along with many of the farm subsidies the bill offered.

The final food stamp savings are generated by making it more difficult for states to give recipients a minimal amount of heating assistance in order to trigger higher food stamp benefits. The cuts were brought down to $800 million a year to come closer to the Senate version of the bill, which had $400 million in annual food stamp cuts.

Still, many liberal Democrats were also expected to vote against the bill, saying the food stamp cuts were too great.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., a longtime proponent of food stamps, said he would vote against the bill and would encourage his colleagues to do the same.

"They are trying to ram this thing through before anyone has a chance to read it," he said after the bill was released late Monday and scheduled for a Wednesday vote.

A coalition of powerful meat and poultry groups, generally strong supporters of the legislation, also said Monday they would work against the bill after the heads of the agriculture panels did not include language to delay a labeling program that requires retailers to list the country of origin of meat. Meatpackers say it is too costly for the industry and have fought to have the program repealed in the farm bill.

Despite that opposition, Boehner and Cantor are hoping to corral enough votes to get the bill done. Cantor blamed the Senate for not accepting the House's attempted changes to the food stamp program but said he would support the bill. The legislation would "extend these important agriculture programs, achieve deficit reduction, and help give many Americans an opportunity to achieve independence and get back to work," he said.

Boehner said he had hoped reforms in the bill would go further, but the legislation was "worthy of the House's support."

Lucas helped win Boehner's support by jettisoning a portion of a dairy program overhaul that the speaker firmly opposed. Negotiators have spent the past few months figuring out how to work the dairy program so Boehner and other key lawmakers would support it.

The new program would do away with current price supports and allow farmers to purchase a new kind of insurance that pays out when the gap between the price they receive for milk and their feed costs narrows. But it would not include a so-called stabilization program that would have dictated production cuts when oversupply drives down prices. Boehner called that "Soviet-style" and made it clear

it was a deal-breaker for him.

"If I should expire in the next three days I want a glass of milk on my tombstone because it's what's killed me," Lucas said Monday night of negotiations over the dairy program.

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