

House Agricultural Committee approves farm bill package

April 18, 2018

On April 18, the House Committee on Agriculture voted 26-20 to advance the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 (H.R.2), commonly referred to as the “farm bill,” which was introduced by Committee Chairman Michael Conaway (R-TX-11) on April 12. With authorization of the Agricultural Act of 2014 lapsing at the end of September, the massive farm bill package approved by the committee authorizes programs across the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) including sections on commodities and trade, loans and insurance, conservation and forestry, research, nutrition, and rural development.

H.R.2 would reauthorize a vast list of agricultural, forestry, and soil research programs within the USDA through 2023. The bill would eliminate the fund matching requirement for most competitive agriculture grants and authorize a new competitive research equipment grants program at \$5 million per year. The bill updates the Agricultural and Food Research Initiative (AFRI) priority areas to include soil health and bridges to farm entry for young, beginning, socially disadvantaged, veteran, and immigrant farmers and ranchers. It would increase mandatory funding for organic research to \$30 million per year, while adding soil health as a funding priority. Committee amendments to the bill included adding nutrient recovery systems in the Conservation Innovation Grants trial program and an algae research program under High Priority Research and Extension Initiatives.

In regard to managing natural resources, the farm bill would raise the cap on eligible land from 24 million acres to 29 million acres for the Conservation Reserve Program, which provides a yearly rental payment in exchange for farmers removing sensitive land from agricultural production and planting species that will improve environmental health and quality. The bill would allow for increased forest-thinning projects through a 6,000-acre categorical exclusion from certain reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act to reduce wildfire risk or address disease and insect infestation. If a forest management project is found not to harm a listed species by the Secretary of Agriculture, the bill would remove a requirement for consultation under the Endangered Species Act.

H.R.2 would also consolidate USDA conservation programs, resulting in cuts to those programs by \$800 million over a decade. The biggest conservation program in the country, the Conservation Stewardship Program, would be eliminated, with some of its initiatives moved to the Environmental Quality Incentives Program.

While Chairman Conaway expects the House to vote on the bill in May 2018, the Senate is not likely to pass H.R.2 due to contentious provisions related to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and instead will likely introduce another bill that is more likely to pass the chamber. If both the House and Senate chambers cannot agree to final bill language by the end of September this year, Congress will need to pass an extension of the current statute in order to maintain the programs.

Sources: E&E News, Government Publishing Office, U.S. House Committee on Agriculture
