

Farm Bill Press Call

June 13, 2012

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D., Mich.)

Note: This is an **unofficial** transcript of a *Farm Bill Press Call* with Chairwoman Stabenow and reporters.



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Senator Debbie Stabenow: Good morning, everybody. Thanks very much for joining us as we get started today and begin some votes on the farm bill. I just wanted to provide an update on where we were. And we're very pleased that we're beginning the debate on the farm bill, and we've got two very important amendments that we are in the process of discussing, one dealing with the sugar policy that would actually eliminate the sugar policy, and another one, Senator Paul's amendment, that would [cut and] block grant food assistance under the nutrition program, so we'll move forward on those. We intend then to move forward on other amendments.

If we aren't able to do unanimous consent, which we will be attempting to do again this morning, then we will move forward in the other path that Senator Reid has set out for us that does allow us, when there's an objection, to move ahead and to vote on amendments. And as we're doing that, we're also putting together the final universe of amendments that we'll be addressing. So good movement, good movement in putting that together overnight and this morning so far.

And I think the most important thing for us in moving forward, for Senator Roberts and I, is that this is a bill that has huge bipartisan support in committee, 90 votes to proceed last week. I don't know any bill that's gotten 90 votes in the Senate in a long time on a motion to proceed, and we're very pleased that we continue to have very broad support from 125 different farm groups, healthy food groups, other stakeholders, and of course the strong support on conservation, with 643 different conservation and environmental groups supporting our process moving forward.

And as we've said so many times, there is no other legislation that has come before us, bipartisan legislation, that offers an opportunity to vote to reduce the deficit by over \$23 billion, so this kind of bipartisan deficit reduction is very rare. And bipartisanship, in fact, in general, very rare in the climate that we're dealing with.

And Senator Roberts and I are very appreciative of what we have been able to do at this point, and very confident that we will continue to move forward and get it done.

And I would just also indicate that failure to act would be a real blow to the economy. This is a jobs bill. We are talking about 16 million jobs dependent on agriculture. And given the fact that this has been the bright spot in our economy, we certainly want to make sure we keep it going, our trade surplus going, the increase in the agricultural economy going.

And it would be really a very sad day if, instead of passing this, we reverted back to the ag policies of the 1940s and extended the status quo. We would be extending subsidies that we all agree should be eliminated, and we would be going back to the era of paying farmers for things they don't plant, and that makes absolutely no sense. So we're committed. Deficit reduction, real reform, great agricultural policy moving forward. And with the twists and turns of the United States Senate, we appreciate Senator Reid hanging in there with us on various procedures to get there, and I'm confident that we will. So be happy to answer questions.

Moderator: Folks, if you have a question, please press pound 7-1 to get in line to ask your question and I will move you to the floor.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Larry Dreiling: Larry Dreiling, *High Plains Journal*.

Sen. Stabenow: Hi, Larry.

Mr. Dreiling: Hi, Senator Stabenow. Nice to be with you today.

Sen. Stabenow: Thank you.

Mr. Dreiling: My question relates to just the veritable number of amendments that have been posted. Where are we going to be looking at – you talked about two amendments that will be discussed on the floor, but what are we going to do with the myriad of other non-germane and—

Sen. Stabenow: Well, this – sure...this...

Mr. Dreiling: —amendments?

Sen. Stabenow: Good question. It's not unusual. We had a hundred amendments that were filed in the committee process. We were able to negotiate and get that down to 44 that were accepted by the committee on a bipartisan basis, and actually ended up having a markup, they tell me, that set a record of four and a half hours, as opposed to two weeks. And so I'm very confident that we can get that number down. We have – I don't know the exact number – 200 and some. We've already gotten it down substantially, and we'll continue to do that. So that's just the normal process.

You know, this is a bill that covers everything from production agriculture, conservation, alternative energy, nutrition, farm credit, rural development. It's a very broad bill, very important to rural America and to jobs in our country, so it's not surprising that people would have a lot of ideas. But I'm confident we can get those numbers down.

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Dreiling: Larry Dreiling, *High Plains Journal*.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Female Voice: [*inaudible*] Yes, good morning, Senator Stabenow.

Sen. Stabenow: Good morning.

Female Voice: I wanted to find out – yesterday Senator [McConnell] talked about five amendments. Two of them dealt with the Clean Water Act jurisdiction, dealt with amendments in the EPA, and I believe a number of them have been filed. Are those amendments a part of the negotiation, are those the sticking points that's holding up an agreement?

Sen. Stabenow: Well, we have two kinds of amendments – those that are germane or relevant to the farm bill, and those are the ones that we are negotiating to an acceptable number to be able to vote on, and then there would be those that are not relevant. And our leaderships will be involved with that as well. And so certainly EPA is not under the jurisdiction of the Department of Agriculture or the committee's jurisdiction, and it involves a wider discussion with people, and that will be taking place. So we have two different kinds of negotiations.

I would just urge people, given the fact that we have 16 million people in this country counting on us, their job related to agriculture, and in addition to that, every American counts on us to get this right because we have the safest, most affordable food supply in the world, and we want to keep it that way, that we not get too far afield here and we keep this to relevant amendments.

Female Voice: Thank you, Senator.

Operator: Now leaving the floor... [*inaudible*].

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Mr. Chuck Abbott: Chuck Abbott.

Sen. Stabenow: Chuck.

Mr. Abbott: Good morning, Madame Chairwoman. I'm hopeful you can explain to us a little more clearly what's the format for considering amendments. I watched last

night's discussion, and it included a motion to recommit. This is something I have not followed in the Senate before.

Sen. Stabenow: [*Laughs.*]

Mr. Abbott: I'm wondering if you could explain what [process] you're following—

Sen. Stabenow: Sure.

Mr. Abbott: —and how long this is likely to happen. And finally, are you headed to the point where there's going to have to be a cloture vote, because you've spent a week now essentially doing nothing.

Sen. Stabenow: Well, first of all, let me say Monday night was a vote on a judge. We just got a cloture last Thursday to move to the bill, so yesterday was really our first day. So we're just, you know, we're getting started here. Yesterday was the first day in which we were trying to move forward on amendments.

And while we negotiated a global agreement, we felt it was important to get started and to have a unanimous consent on a number of amendments, and we put forward what we thought was eminently fair, a package with two Democratic amendments, three Republican amendments that were important policy issues, whether we agreed with them or not, they're important to discuss and for the Senate to discuss. So that was our attempt to move forward.

And when Senator Paul objected because he wanted his amendment on Pakistan to be debated instead, I appreciate that Senator Reid created a path for us. Rather than just, as they say, filling the tree so there could be no amendments, he used that process to include two of the amendments we had offered so that we could actually move forward and debate them. And the process, at that point, under that scenario, allows, procedurally, only for a motion to table. And so we're getting a debate on both of those.

At the end of it, because we're blocked at the moment from getting unanimous consent to have up or down votes, the vote is on a motion to table. But we will still have that discussion. If people don't want to table the amendment, then it's before the body. So it is another way for us to proceed in a timely way, and I appreciate that Senator Reid's been willing to take really an extraordinary step to support Senator Roberts and I to be able to get this done. Rather than just filling the tree and stopping, he's allowing us to use that process to continue to debate.

So we will do that, and then we will move forward and see if we can't move forward on other amendments. All the time we are in the process of negotiating a universal agreement. So he has really been extraordinarily supportive of us, and Senator McConnell has been supportive of Senator Roberts as well, and we appreciate that. They know how critical it is that we complete this bill.

Mr. Abbott: So is there going to be—

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Abbott: Chuck Abbott.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Mr. Chris Clayton: Chris Clayton.

Sen. Stabenow: Hi, Chris.

Mr. Clayton: Thank you, Senator. It does seem, though, from Senator Reid's tone and his speech he just gave a little while ago on the floor, that he's at least disenchanted about the process and the lack of movement on this bill. And you've indicated your own concern about failure to move forward. What necessarily right now could tie this thing up to a point you're not going to get it moved before the Fourth of July break?

Sen. Stabenow: Well, we're moving forward – first of all, let me say that Senator Reid has many things on his plate, and these procedural obstacles and objections that don't allow us to move forward in the way that the majority of us would like to do in the United States Senate create a situation for him where he has to focus on procedural motions a lot more than he would like to.

But I am very confident that we will get this done. For those who oppose reform, who like the status quo, they will drag their feet. For those that don't care about agricultural policy and have their other amendment that's not germane, or those who certainly don't intend to vote for the bill in the end anyway, they will look for their opportunity to bring forward their issue.

But we are just getting started here, and we are in a spot where we are negotiating and moving forward, and beginning the discussion on the floor. And I know that Senator Reid wants to light some fires to make sure that things move, and that's his role as leader, and we appreciate that. But I'm actually feeling like we're getting going. Yesterday was the first day we actually got started. And I appreciate that because this is a major bill, a five year reauthorization, and it takes a little time to get it done.

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Clayton: Chris Clayton.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Mr. Matt Kay: Matt Kay, Burns Bureau.

Sen. Stabenow: Hi, Matt.

Mr. Kay: Yeah, good morning, Chairman, how are you?

Sen. Stabenow: Good.

Mr. Kay: Yeah, there seems to be a fundamental disagreement here between the two leaders over what should be accepted as an amendment and what should not. And it appears that the Republican leader wants to bring up these environmental and labor regulations as part of the bill. One could argue they do affect agriculture. Certainly water rights, dust—

Sen. Stabenow: Sure.

Mr. Kay: —child labor. Do you disagree that they affect agriculture? And too, how do you expect this disagreement between the two leaders – not other members – but the two leaders to be resolved, and how does that affect the clock?

Sen. Stabenow: Well, all good questions. But those are the same questions you could apply to any bill – the transportation bill that was done on a bipartisan basis. There's no question that there are issues in front of us, some of which I support, some of which I don't. They aren't within our jurisdiction. We will negotiate. The leaders will negotiate to see which ones we will have a vote on. And I've certainly spoken out on a number of different issues that you talked about, and will continue to do that on behalf of agriculture.

But this is a process of a negotiation. It always is. And there's always ups and downs here, and stops and starts in the Senate. Unfortunately, the Senate that we're in, rather than moving forward amendment by amendment and debating and having votes, which is our strong preference, we are in a spot where those who want to obstruct or don't support what we're doing have the ability to throw some sand in the gears, and so not surprising. None of this is surprising at all.

And we'll do what has been successfully done on the prescription drug bill, on the transportation bill, on the other legislation that's been passed on a bipartisan basis, because people of goodwill on both sides understand how important this is for our economy, how important it is in deficit reduction, how important it is in reform, to families, farmers and ranchers. We have a majority who is very sincere in working together on a bipartisan basis. In the end, that will prevail.

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Kay: Matt Kay, Burns Bureau.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Mr. Jeff Nalley: Jeff Nalley.

Sen. Stabenow: Hi, Jeff.

Mr. Nally: Good morning. I hope you're well this morning.

Sen. Stabenow: I am.

Mr. Nalley: Thank you for taking time for us. Here's the question. What effort for compromise has been going on with Southern farmers, namely rice and peanuts? Is there a deal that might include target price or some sort of a countercyclical program? And finally, will PNTR find its way into this farm bill debate? Thank you.

Sen. Stabenow: I don't expect PNTR to find its way into the debate. That's certainly Finance jurisdiction, and that's not something that's been discussed.

In terms of the South, I'm very pleased that we've been able to work out a number of things that are supportive of our cotton growers and that they're supportive of the bill. We continue to have conversations with our rice and peanuts friends to find how we can address their issues.

And we certainly made significant moves in committee with reference prices for them within our new risk management program. We know that they have other concerns. And I'm very confident that by the end of this process, that we will come to the middle on this.

And it's a question of what can be done in the Senate, what can be done in conference. But we talk daily, and I appreciate their concerns and know that crop insurance is not, at this point in time, effective for them and that we have to address other issues, and we're continuing to do that. And whether that's done in the Senate, whether it's done in conference committee, I'm confident that we will be coming together.

Mr. Nalley: Thank you.

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Nalley: Jeff Nalley.

Operator: Now joining the floor...

Mr. Jerry Hagstrom: Jerry Hagstrom.

Sen. Stabenow: Hi. And I'm just given a note here I've got to go to the floor, so you get the last question. Jerry, it's good to talk to you.

Mr. Hagstrom: Good to talk to you. Yesterday sources close to Senator Conrad said that he and Senator Chambliss are working on some kind of an amendment with the blessing of the committee leadership. Can you confirm that, that you have blessed this? And if they came up with an amendment that involved target prices, and maybe something more for cotton and rice, do you think it would pass on the Senate floor?

Sen. Stabenow: Well, at this point we have seen a number of different options. I have obviously tremendous confidence and respect with my friend Kent Conrad as well as

Senator Chambliss, and I've told them I think it's very important we keep talking and looking at options and getting scores. And so we don't, at this point, have anything final and specific, but I certainly welcome them and have encouraged them to talk.

And that's something that, if we get some specific scores that fit, and it fits within the context of what we're doing, certainly Senator Roberts and I will want to sit down and talk with them. But again, this is all a process, and I think that the role that Senator Conrad is playing, as usual, is very important and very constructive, and we welcome the ideas. At this point we have not had anything given to us to react to.

Operator: Now leaving the floor...

Mr. Hagstrom: Jerry Hagstrom.

Sen. Stabenow: Yes. Let me just complete, as I go down to the floor today, just to remind everybody that this farm bill has been a very interesting process all the way through in working with Senator Roberts and Senator Lucas, and Congressman Peterson in the fall, because every step of the way people have said we couldn't get this done.

Everybody said there's no way you'll get a House-Senate, bipartisan agreement in the fall on deficit reduction. We were the only committee that did that, complete with scores and language. Then we were told in committee you will never get a bipartisan bill out of committee under the structure of reform that moves to risk-based management and moves away from old policies. And we did, a 16 to five vote.

And then they said we'll never get it on the floor – based on reform, there was not enough support for reform, we won't get it through the floor. We got 90 votes on the floor. So let me just say I would suggest that people not underestimate the number of folks in the Senate who care about these issues, who want deficit reduction, who want reform, who want agricultural policy that works for our country, and we're just going to keep on working. So thanks very much, everybody.

[End of recording.]