

The Oklahoma Farm Report – Radio Oklahoma Network

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Ron Hays with House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R., Okla.)

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Mr. Ron Hays: We're talking with the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma Congressman Frank Lucas. Mr. Chairman, you've been in the process of working with your leadership. You have a bill that's going to be heard, apparently, on the floor Wednesday of this week in the U.S. House.

Rep. Lucas: Absolutely, Ron. There are many pieces in this process going on simultaneously. I'm still working for floor time for the regular bipartisan farm bill that passed out of the House Agriculture Committee not many days ago.

But at the same time, I'm working to bring a one year extension to the floor, hopefully next week, before we go home for the August work period, that would extend the existing farm bill forward by one year, it would make some very small cuts in the direct payment program, it would take some cuts that the appropriators have done annually through the rest of this farm bill to achieve savings so that the livestock disaster provisions, which in the '08 Farm Bill weren't funded in the fifth year, this year would be funded, and also funded for next year.

So I'm trying, on a two-track front here, to provide certainty to producers who are dealing with the drought, yet try to get us a real five-year farm bill completed this year.

Mr. Hays: A lot of confusion, obviously, out in the country about what's going on in D.C. right now. This is a lot of...I don't know if you want to call it very technical stuff going on, but it seems like we've got a lot of ideas, a lot of opinions that are being brought forward.

Rep. Lucas: Well, Ron, you hear rumors about not taking the regular farm bill to the floor and going automatically to conference, you hear concepts about maybe the

principals, myself and Mr. Peterson, Chairwoman Stabenow, Senator Roberts working out a farm bill, you know, shucking a Senate bill and putting it in.

I would just say this: I'm a regular order kind of guy. Just as we used regular order to achieve a consensus in the Ag Committee, and we passed a solid, five-year farm bill with options, so all producers could participate, by a 35 to 11 vote, I still want to go to the floor. I still want to go through regular order. I still want to build a consensus, take that vehicle to conference, and put our final work together.

But whatever route is available to me to put a five-year farm bill on the books, I'm going to attempt to do, because the drought that we suffered through in the Southwest last year, the most horrendous drought in my living memory, which, by the way, has not gone away completely yet in the Southwest, is now plaguing our friends from the Central West all the way through the Midwest. We've got some issues here. They need certainty. And especially our livestock folks.

Because the way the '08 Farm Bill was put together, the fifth year of the farm bill, the one we're in right now, there's no money to deal with livestock drought disaster issues. I want to provide certainty for that. I want people to be able to sleep at night. And right now, if you're a livestock producer in a drought area, you're sleeping with one eye open.

Mr. Hays: That's a lot of the country, really.

Rep. Lucas: That is a broad swath of the country. And when you factor in the renewable fuel mandate, the ethanol requirement for gasoline in this country, instead of the 40 or 45% of the corn crop that's gone through the ethanol cookers, that may be 50%. That may be 50% plus.

We need to bear in mind, too, that with the federal mandate – which, by the way, is in the jurisdiction of the U.S. House Energy Committee, not the Ag Committee – with that federal mandate, they have to have their ethanol to blend with their gasoline. They will pay the premium dollar for the corn that's available. So that just shrinks the available supply even more for both animal feed and human food.

Mr. Hays: At this point, doing the one-year extension, that does not jeopardize the work you've done on the House Ag Committee?

Rep. Lucas: It does not. And I would say this. The magnitude of the changes that will ultimately be the next 2012 Farm Bill – doing away with the direct payments, a bigger focus on price revenue and a bigger focus on this revenue protection – the changes are of such a magnitude the orderly way to implement a new farm bill would be to pass a one-year extension, because by the time we pass a farm bill, by the time USDA writes the rules and regulations to implement a farm bill, by the time the FSA goes out and develops the software, trains the FSA employees, they have a chance to explain it and the producers make a decision, that's months from now.

One more year of this farm bill, to provide for an orderly transition to the next farm bill, would be the reasonable way to do this. Now, unfortunately, things at the nation's capital aren't always done in the most reasonable way, in spite of my best efforts. But a one-year extension would allow us to have an orderly transition to the next farm bill.

Mr. Hays: What are you expecting as far as the rules of the game for Wednesday?

Rep. Lucas: The Rules Committee will meet on Tuesday. I have made it very clear to leadership that we don't want this one-year extension bill to become a mini farm bill debate. If you want to have a mini farm bill debate, just let me bring my bill to the floor.

I would anticipate a closed rule. I would anticipate a limited amount of debate, because the only change we make is to move the existing '08 Farm Bill one year farther down the road, and slight adjustments in funding levels to address both the fifth year and what would be the sixth year of this farm bill's livestock feed assistance. That's minimal changes. We can debate this up, we can debate it down, and we can hopefully pass it out on, I think, Wednesday, probably.

Mr. Hays: And no SURE in [year five or five] section?

Rep. Lucas: Now, on the crop side, the view of the committee is quite simply with such a high participation rate in crop insurance in the Midwest, and with the price of corn now in the eight-dollar stratosphere, and the high production yields that they've achieved over the last ten years, this year they'll be just fine.

But it's the livestock folks who have nothing. They're the ones who are exposed. If we can take care of them and get some certainty for all of us to get to the next farm bill, I think folks would be able to sleep better at night, and I like for my constituents to be able to sleep at night.

[End of recording.]