

The Oklahoma Farm Report- Radio Oklahoma Network

June 26, 2013

Ron Hays with House Ag. Comm. Chairman Frank Lucas (R., Okla.)

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of an Oklahoma Farm Report- Radio Oklahoma Network interview.



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Mr. Ron Hays: We're talking today with the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Congressmen from the Third District of Oklahoma, Frank Lucas. Congressman, last Thursday was really the first time that, as far as I can see, looking at the research, the first time that the House of Representatives had ever said no on the floor to a farm bill before. I know that was a tremendous disappointment to you.

Rep. Frank Lucas: Absolutely, Ron. This is my fourth farm bill, and in 1996 I watched as two farm bills were rejected in the House Agriculture Committee itself, but this is the first time, as far as I can tell, a bill was rejected on the floor. And that doesn't mean that the process is over with. That doesn't mean that the reforms that were included in the bill, whether it's the commodity title, or nutrition, or conservation aren't important, relevant, and won't ultimately become law. It just means on that day, on that bill, at that moment, Mr. Peterson and I could not persuade a simple majority, 218 of our colleagues, to vote with us.

And our listeners need to remember this is a bill that was offered to the floor that had been subject to a hundred amendments in committee in a very open process. It's a bill that had been subjected by the Rules Committee on the floor of the United States House after those hundred amendments in committee to a hundred and three or four amendments. We had listened to every member. We'd had debates on a variety of topics. We'd adopted a substantial number of amendments.

But ultimately the bill would have ended direct payments, shifted us to a choice system on the commodity title, whether it was price protection or shallow loss revenue. It would have maintained our commitment to crop insurance, would have adjusted the CRP acres to reflect the market decisions that are being made in

this voluntary conservation program, dropping them from 32 million authorized acres down to 24. It was a bill that saved \$40 billion in mandatory spending.

And the great debate up here is not cutting the stuff that we spend from year to year discretionary, which we've done a very good job in the House, but how do you go after the long-term locked in spending mandatory. This \$40 billion, half out of the part of the bill that raises food, half out of the part of the bill that deals with the consumption of food, was the first real major mandatory spending reform bill to come to the floor in I don't know how long.

That said, in the nutrition title, ending automatic food stamps, no more categorical eligibility, making states put more skin in the game in something they call LIHEAP or heat and eat, a savings of about \$20.5 billion, approximately, totally, together. But language also requiring...giving states the authority to do drug testing for recipients, giving states the authority to set up a work requirement for food stamps, dealing with convicted felons, I mean, a myriad of reforms.

And that's the real frustration to me. When the bill finally was... all the amendments were considered, the supply management section of dairy was taken out, but the rest of the dairy language was maintained. The sugar program was left in place, the commodity programs were left in place, the things that would deal with livestock, drought disaster were left in place.

The ultimate thing I think that made it impossible on that day to pass a bill dealt with the food stamp issues, the nutrition issues. My liberal colleagues could apparently only accept so much reform. I think they would have voted for a bill that would have cut the \$20 billion out of the nutrition title through reforms. I think they were prepared to address testing and a variety of other things.

But when you put all that together, it was too much for my liberal friends to support, and there was a revolt among the Democrats. But also, in all fairness, Ron, I cannot criticize the Democrats exclusively because 61 of my Republican colleagues, who voted for every one of those major reforms on food stamps, wouldn't vote for the final bill, and that's even more amazing.

Mr. Hays: Now, your ranking member, Mr. Peterson, has talked to the media in various forms and fashions, and he's pointed to a couple of amendments there at the very end of the process, the dairy amendment, but also one of the food stamp amendments, the one that was approved, the Southerland amendment, he indicated that those are the ones that just peeled the last of the Democrats away, that really took away any chance of getting the bill passed.

Rep. Lucas: I think the best way is to use the old adage about how many bricks can you put on the mule's back and still have a mule that can carry the bricks. Perhaps that last one or two, the load became too heavy, and that's when the support snapped on the other side. I think that's very reasonable.

On dairy, that was a very bipartisan vote to remove supply management. Certainly there may have been certain liberals who voted for that to take a shot at Collin personally, but the numbers were just overwhelming there. The one vote on major policy that didn't seem to involve any of these issues was sugar, and it was just a clear vote on the language, which is a program that doesn't cost the federal government any money, and a majority of the membership, not by a huge margin, but a majority of the membership, Rs and Ds, voted to sustain the program. I think Collin is particularly right about the end, where just maybe one brick too many vote reforms.

Now that brings us around, Ron, to the question of where do we go next. And I'm in the process of nonstop discussions with Collin and with my majority leadership about where we do go next. We have to have a farm bill. These reforms were too important to step away from, but what vehicle do we use, how quick can we do it? That's what I'm trying to figure out today.

Mr. Hays: We've heard, obviously, various ideas out there floating around. One idea came from the Senate side, that Mr. Peterson immediately was very critical of, and that was the idea of just the Senate bill be brought up in the House. He thought that that would really get beat badly. The others that were out there, the idea of maybe trying to take just the House Ag Committee product back to the Rules Committee, see if you get a different rule. What are the things that you're really seriously looking at right now?

Rep. Lucas: First off, let me say Collin's exactly right. The Senate bill saves about half what the House bill saves. The Senate bill does not have a strong version of choice in the commodity title, and those of us outside the Midwest have to have choice to really be able to participate, so those are critical issues to me.

Mechanically there are, though, other procedures, by everything from taking the Senate bill up on the floor and rejecting one word or one comma and calling for conference, although that, I think, gives the House a more challenging effort in trying to sort out our differences.

The possibility of going back to Rules Committee and asking that the House committee passed version be brought back to the floor with a rule basically limiting the number of amendments is a possibility. But I would say on many of the amendments that were adopted, there was overwhelming support, so it's hard to not offer up again the language that overwhelmingly the membership supported.

So perhaps one of the options would be simply bring the House considered version in its final form, minus one or two very, very contentious points, back in a closed rule. We've debated everything. Just have a limited hour of debate and then vote up or down with a slightly...a more straightforward version, something like that. These are all things on the table. I do not control the Rules Committee,

nor do I control the floor schedule, so I have to work with my majority leadership, and of course my ranking member, because it's got to be done in a bipartisan way.

What was demonstrated this last week, Ron, was, just as we've known in virtually every farm bill, with the exception of 1996, which was not really considered by itself on the floor, it's the coalition of the middle—the hard extremes of the body have never voted for farm bills—it's the coalition in the middle that cares about our food supply, cares about rural America, that's passed the bill before. We just have to get closer, I think, back to those principles and we'll pass the bill.

But I assure all my neighbors back home, I tried as hard as I could, in the circumstances that I was in, to put 218 votes together. I tried. I will continue to try. We will get this done. Just not sure how crooked the trail's going to be or when it will happen. Or maybe the better phrase is how wild the roller coaster ride is going to be. But we will get this done, Ron.

Mr. Hays: One thing we've heard some conversation about, we heard it before the actual bill came to the floor and really through the entire process, is kind of that question kind of at the fringe, and a few more folks have been asking the question since the defeat of the bill last Thursday, the idea of is now the time or are we approaching the time where no longer should food stamps, the nutrition title, be a part of the overall farm bill?

Rep. Lucas: You have to look at the environment I am in, the nature of the membership. Set the party labels aside. Better to describe them as conservative or liberal. I describe them as rural or urban or suburban.

If you split the two bills apart, if you take the two concepts, if you break the bill up into pieces—maybe that's the better way to put it—I can't imagine very many Republican votes for a nutrition reform bill. And the way the law works right now, those programs just keep right on going, unreformed, [unrepentant]. They just keep right on going.

By the same token, many of my members from more urban and inner city districts only tolerate the farm policy because it's attached to the social nutrition programs. I don't think you can pass a farm bill without some incentive from our friends who live outside of rural America to vote with us.

How many times have you heard me say in public that with the 2002 Farm Bill it became nutrition, it became a commodity title, and it became a conservation bill. If we don't have that three-legged stool, we can't get by on one leg by ourselves. When you look at the so-called political activist groups on the East Coast, the paid mercenaries, they don't want a farm bill, and that's why they advocate these things. This is the best way to kill a farm safety net is split us up, chop us up and cause us to wilt and die.

Mr. Hays: So the conservation lobby, if you had conservation and commodities and the research and some of those titles, that would still not be enough of a coalition?

Rep. Lucas: It would not be. And I'll go one step further and say watching and working to whip this bill, I had a number of groups who were whipping on dairy, or they were whipping on sugar, or they were whipping on conservation compliance, or they were whipping on this or whipping on that. They were so vested and consumed by their own little slice of the bill that they forgot to whip on final passage.

And it didn't matter whether they won or lost their little slice, if the bill didn't have 218 votes, it was all for naught on that day. So shame on some rather substantial groups around the country who put their own pet projects ahead of the best interest of the country and rural America as a whole by not focusing on final passage with at least as much enthusiasm as they were attacking or defending certain subsets of the bill.

Mr. Hays: You alluded to the 1996 Farm Bill a few minutes ago. Help me remember, but it seems to me that we never saw an actual open type debate on the floor of the House with the '96 bill. Is that right? Is that a possible model to try to get this one done?

Rep. Lucas: I don't know, Ron, but we need to remember in 1996, then Chairman Roberts twice had markups that I can remember on the farm bill, twice could not get a majority vote out of the committee. Ultimately the bill was included in something called budget reconciliation, a big bill, a big giant bill that deals with cuts around in different parts of the federal government.

It came to the floor under a closed rule, un-amendable, with limited debate. Most of the focus was on the budgetary cuts in other areas. At that time you had a Republican House and a Republican Senate. They passed it. Bill Clinton, who was gearing up to run for reelection, was happy to sign anything that appeared to help rural America, and we moved forward.

The '96 bill was an anomaly. Historically, the farm bills have always been done in an open process in committee and on the floor. Historically, consensus has been achieved. But these are amazingly polarized times that we live in. It's just different than it has been in the past.

Mr. Hays: One last question, sir. In regards to the floor debate that we saw this last week, it was obviously hours and hours. The one thing that really stuck out to me, as you went through all the various amendments, especially on the nutrition title, boy, we're talking about the polarization, the cries of children being deprived of food. That was the call that we heard time and time again. Ms. Pelosi one of those that talked about the children, the children, the children. How do you get past that?

Rep. Lucas: It's difficult, Ron, because if you look at the nature of the committee passed bill, whether it's ending categorical eligibility, automatic food stamps or making northern states put real money in the program that they provide home

heating oil with for their citizens to justify the automatic food stamps, all we simply said in the House committee was apply, demonstrate that you qualify. Show us your assets. Show us your income. We'll help you. We'll help you. You just have to play by the rules. That's all we were ever asking.

Our language, especially in committee, was not crafted to hurt anyone who needed help, but it was to make sure that the help went to the people who really needed it and qualify under existing law. Now on the other side, some of my more liberal friends, I guess they believe that not only...it's just the debate, at some points, deviated a little bit from the facts. Maybe that's the way I should put it.

Mr. Hays: Regarding timing, you kind of said earlier you just don't have any real feel on how you're going to—

Rep. Lucas: Mechanically there's no way, I think, to do anything this week, and we're at home for the Fourth of July, or back in the districts next week. We come back after that. I believe we have four weeks of session in July. I would just simply say as quick as I can work out something that will secure 218 votes and I can get it to the floor, that's when I want to do it. This is something that needs to be done sooner than later. I just don't know yet in what form or at what time.

And also we need to remember a House passed version is still going to be dramatically different than the Senate bill. We'll still have to go to conference and work out our differences with the Senate. I think the commodity and conservation title is manageable, once we get to conference, in a reasonable amount of time.

But the nutrition issues, as you just alluded, the positions that senior leadership on the other side has taken here in the House, their number is four and a half billion in that particular area of savings, ours is about 20.5 billion. That's a lot of difference, Ron. So working out our differences in nutrition may require more than just Senator Stabenow and I. That may take the Speaker, the Majority Floor Leader and the President. But I won't know until I get to that point.

Mr. Hays: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. The chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Oklahoma's Third District congressman based out of Roger Mills County in western Oklahoma, Frank Lucas. On the Oklahoma Farm Report, I'm Ron Hays.

[End of recording.]