

AgriTalk

July 17, 2013

Mike Adams with House Ag. Committee Chairman Frank Lucas (R., Okla.)

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of an *AgriTalk* interview.



Keith Good
FarmPolicy.com, Inc.
Champaign, IL
www.FarmPolicy.com

Rep. Lucas: Mike, my understanding is that the staff of the U.S. House—I believe that would be the clerk’s office—have transmitted to the United States Senate our copy of H.R. 2642 that we passed last week in the United States House. That means we’re now at a point in time where the Senate has to take the next step. They passed their bill substantially earlier.

But unfortunately, because of a constitutional issue dealing with revenue, their bill cannot be heard on the floor of the House in its present form. It’s been blue slipped by the Ways and Means Committee. So now the Senate either has to pass our bill, which of course I think would be a great idea, or reject our bill, and I suppose insert their language into our bill and send it back, which would lead to a conference.

But at this moment the United States Senate has the House passed version of what I call the farm bill farm bill, and we’re waiting on them to take action.

Mr. Mike Adams: Why has it taken this long? Chairwoman Stabenow said she was surprised that she had not received it sooner.

Rep. Lucas: Well, mechanically you’re talking about doing things over the weekend. The copies have to be proofed and verified and enrolled, and there’s certain procedures that I don’t pretend to fully understand that date all the way back to 1789 and the very first Congress. But that’s now been done and the House passed draft of the bill is now in the Senate’s hands where the Senate needs to take action so that we can go the next step officially.

Mr. Adams: Have you received any word about when conferees will be named? And who might those conferees be from the House?

Rep. Lucas: Well, I would say this. I've had a conversation with Senator Stabenow about beginning what would be termed up here as the pre conference process, discussing the things that the House and the Senate could sort out in the language that we have passed. Clearly I'm still working on trying to come up with some kind of a consensus bill on nutrition. I'm trying very hard to do that.

But very soon, one way or the other—matter of fact, the majority leader has appointed a working group to work on that process with me—sooner or later we'll get to that point. But for conferees to be appointed, the Senate has to take action. And I guess if they passed our bill it would go to the President. If they reject it, I assume they would substitute their language to send back. At that point then it would be time for conferees. But technically it's not possible to appoint conferees yet because we're not procedurally at that point.

Mr. Adams: It does get complicated.

Rep. Lucas: Oh, yes.

Mr. Adams: And what about a nutrition bill in the House taken up separately? Do you expect that any time soon?

Rep. Lucas: Well, I begin, as we speak today, working to try to put language together. I would say this: it's going to be a bit of a challenge, because if you looked at the House passed bill, we ended automatic food stamps categorical eligibility. We made the Northern states that have something called head and eat, LIHEAP, put 20 times as much money into the program as they're presently putting. Those two things saved about \$20 billion.

We ended advertising in the United States and outside of the country. We ended the hiring of recruiters that push food stamps. And on the floor of the House, language was added to give states very clear authority to require drug testing to qualify for food stamps, to have a work requirement, workfare for food stamps, and by voice vote, language which actually matches very closely Senate passed language forbidding convicted felons drawing food stamps.

If that's not enough reform, then the question I have for a lot of my colleagues, Mike, and I am working on this week as we speak, is then what additional reform do you need? Do you pursue Paul Ryan, the chairman of the House Budget Committee's proposal from earlier this year about block granting food stamps back to the states like Medicaid? Which way do you go? I'm just not sure what the final solution will be, and if I can secure a majority of the House for any particular plan.

With that said, though, if the Senate chooses to pursue conferencing food stamps as part of the package, then they're certainly able to do that. It's in their core bill right now. But at this moment I would say I am working very hard, in good faith, as I promised the Rules Committee of the United States House and the members

on the floor of the United States House, to try and craft that nutrition package. But man, it's pushing a big boulder up a tall hill.

Mr. Adams: So what happens if a bill comes out of conference committee with nutrition language in it and then you have a separate nutrition bill in the House? Then where are we?

Rep. Lucas: Well, if there's language in a final farm bill, then I would suspect that would supersede. Because remember, even if the House has passed a separate bill, if the Senate never touches it, it never becomes law, it never has an opportunity even to get to the President's desk. The better question is if we cannot agree on nutrition language in the House, will the Senate still insist on nutrition as a part of the bill or will they be willing to move the farm bill only?

If you are a very liberal member of Congress and believe that the most important part of the farm bill are the feeding programs, the social nutrition programs, you could make the argument that in the way that food stamps work, because it's an appropriated entitlement, that as long as the appropriators put the authorizing language in on a year-to-year basis, it would be authorized. If you're a liberal and you don't want any cuts whatsoever, then I suspect you'd advocate a farm bill only, you'd leave food stamps in place where they are, and hope that Republicans aren't in control after the next election day.

By the same token, if you insist on having food stamp authorization—remember, we save \$20.5 billion in the initial draft of the farm bill considered in the House, the Senate saved \$4.5 billion—if you insist on a food stamp provision, then you're almost guaranteed a cut, whether it's the Senate's four and a half billion or the earlier farm bill's version in the House with 20.5. Demand a comprehensive bill and take a cut, pass a farm bill farm bill and technically, in the way the law works right now, take no cut for the rest of this session. But my liberal friends have to sort that out on their own.

Mr. Adams: Let's assume that the bill comes out of conference committee with the nutrition title and something closer to the Senate's 4 billion in cuts than your 20 billion in cuts. Do you think that has any way of passing on the House floor?

Rep. Lucas: Clearly it would require an overwhelming support from Democrats on the other side of the room. Many of my Republican colleagues would define four and a half billion, as spelled out in the Senate bill, which basically just looks at making Northern states put \$10 a month into LIHEAP to get their citizens an automatic full month's worth of food stamps without applying versus the \$1 now or the \$20 that the House had in their bill, I'd lose a tremendous number of my Republicans if the reforms were that small.

By the same token, it would require participation from the other side. I just don't know yet how all those pieces are going to play out. You can think of it as a

chess game, you can think of it as a checkers game, Mike, but there are a lot of moving parts here.

Many of us who are from rural America are very, very focused on the commodity title, conservation, rural development, ag research, all of those things that raise the food and help make sure we have a viable rural America. But a substantial number of my colleagues in Congress almost don't seem to know or care where their food comes from, and to them, whether it's spending that 80% of the farm bill, as has been the case in the last few years, on nutrition programs, or trying to reform it, that seems to be the biggest single issue with a lot of my colleagues who are not connected with the farm anymore in a direct way.

Mr. Adams: How do you feel right now about what has happened so far? Do you feel that your party's leadership allowed your bill to get hijacked and really allowed this to happen?

Rep. Lucas: Mike, I've been on a roller coaster, and over the last few weeks, clearly a majority of my colleagues in the United States House, in an open process, determined that they wanted substantially more food stamp reforms than the committee package was that passed out of committee overwhelmingly in a bipartisan way.

I am, though, very disappointed in my colleagues, 60 of whom would vote to dramatically tighten the standards, but then say on final passage that wasn't good enough and vote no. I mean, you've got to be a responsible bunch of legislators.

And by the same token, on the other side of the room, I would also say, in regards to my friends in the minority, if food stamps are as important as many of them say—in the political minority, I'm speaking of my Democrat colleagues—then moving the bill along so that you could get to conference committee, where ultimately the differences would be worked out, where a final package would be put together, seems very important. At least I would think it would be.

But on that day my friends on the right and my friends on the left ganged up on me and huffed and puffed and prevented anything from happening. That's why I had to come back with Plan B, which now gives me a vehicle to conference with the Senate. Not necessarily the way, perhaps, I originally would have done it, not traditionally the way we do farm bills, or at least have since the 1960s, but I now have a way to sit down with the Senate and work out a final bill, I believe. I hope.

[End of recording.]