

Kara O'Connor: A quality Farm Bill is worth the wait

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There is a sign hanging on the wall of my local shoe repair shop that says: "Our work can be: Fast. Good. Cheap. Pick any two of the three." This might be a good motto for members of Congress to keep in mind as they vote on the next Farm Bill.

The House Agriculture Committee seems to be taking the Fast approach, but I wouldn't characterize their product as either Good or Cheap. The House Farm Bill proposal makes no substantive improvements to Farm Bill Dairy programs. We're losing 1.5 dairy farms per day here in Wisconsin, and the Farm Bill proposed by the House Agriculture Committee is just more of the same.

The House version of the Farm Bill weakens payment limitations and waters down the definition of "actively engaged in farming" to allow large corporate farms, and even distant relatives of farmers, to get more subsidies. Backtracking on reasonable farm program limitations not only adds to the cost of the Farm Bill, but also dials up the antipathy that taxpayers increasingly feel toward "farm" subsidies that don't actually go to farmers.

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When it comes to nutrition programs in the Farm Bill, the House proposal would achieve the dubious distinction of cutting 75,000 Wisconsinites off of nutrition assistance, 23,000 of them children, without saving taxpayers any money. You read that right - instead of actually feeding people with nutrition program dollars, the same amount of money will be spent on additional government red tape to administer more complicated eligibility screening.

And then, in an apparent attempt to make up for the House Agriculture Committee's failure to exercise fiscal discipline elsewhere, the proposal cuts \$1 billion from conservation programs to protect soil and groundwater and eliminates the Conservation Stewardship Program.

Let's ask our members of Congress to write a Good Farm Bill, not just a Fast one. Reinstate a more reasonable definition of "actively engaged in farming," so that farm program support goes only to farmers. Tighten up farm program payment caps and payment limitations, so the Farm Bill is a safety net for average farmers rather than a cash cow for mega farms. Reinstate the Market Stabilization feature that was originally intended to be part of the Margin Protection Program for Dairy, which would reduce the cost of the dairy program to taxpayers. Restore conservation funding to protect soil and water resources. And focus nutrition program dollars on actually feeding people, especially children, rather than more red tape and government rigmarole.

A Farm Bill, like a trusty pair of shoes, sees a lot of wear. That's why I think that a good and fiscally responsible Farm Bill is worth the wait. Please ask your member of Congress to vote NO on the House version of the Farm Bill.

— *O'Connor is government relations director for Wisconsin Farmers Union.*