

## Senate leader praises farm bill that draws foes of all stripes

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Washington – Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., described the \$288 billion, five-year farm bill that reached the Senate floor on Monday as a historic reform, even as a broad coalition of critics denounced it as obscene and warned congressional leaders and presidential candidates that they see changing 70-year old crop subsidies as an election-year test.

The Bush administration issued a blistering veto threat, with acting Agriculture Secretary Chuck Conner saying the bill makes a mockery of budget rules, continues subsidies to "Park Avenue millionaires" and imperils public support for farm programs. He called the bill "just simply wrong."

Seldom in Washington do such coalitions develop that unite the Bush White House and the group Environmental Defense on one side, and on the other, Senate Democrats and Republicans who have set aside their ideological hostilities to preserve and expand crop subsidies for a minority of wealthy farmers.

Both parties are scrambling to find billions of dollars to appease critics coming at them from all sides - from anti-poverty advocates who look to Democrats to taxpayer groups who find allies among Republicans.



Sen. Tom Harkin (left), Agriculture Committee chairman, wants to cut direct payments. AP / Dennis Cook, 2002

The bill now before the Senate, written by the Agriculture Committee, provides \$42 billion in subsidies to five crops - corn, cotton, wheat, rice and soybeans, as well as smaller programs for sugar and dairy. Most farmers, including the 91 percent of California farmers who grow fresh fruits, nuts and vegetables, do not get these subsidies.

Payments are based on production, so the most money goes to the biggest farms. The bill adds a \$5.1 billion "permanent disaster" fund that will mainly reward farmers of the same crops in the Plains states where marginal land routinely produces crop failures.

Committee Chairman Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, fought unsuccessfully to reduce the \$26 billion in "direct payments" that go to subsidized farmers regardless of market prices, even as farm incomes increased to an estimated record \$87 billion this year.

"It's very hard to justify direct payments to farmers when we're having record incomes for farmers and high prices," Harkin said.

Two California farms rank near the top recipients of direct payments nationwide, according to an analysis by the Environmental Working Group. Dublin Farms in Corcoran (Kings County) ranks second and would collect more than \$3.2 million over the next five

years under the proposed Senate legislation; Sandridge Partners in Sunnyvale would collect more than \$2.2 million.

The bill also includes spending increases for environmental, nutrition and other programs favored by critics of the subsidy system.

These include \$16 million for research in organic agriculture, more money for conservation, food stamps and other nutrition programs, including higher purchases of fresh fruits and vegetables. It provides more money for farmers' markets and other measures aimed at making local farm produce more accessible.

This has hardly appeased the environmental, religious, public health and taxpayer groups who say the subsidies damage the environment, hurt small farmers by speeding farm industrialization, harm impoverished farmers in the developing world, and boost production of the fats and starches that feed America's obesity epidemic that now finds 1 in 3 children likely to get diabetes in their lifetime.

"Just because you've rolled horse manure in powdered sugar doesn't mean you have a doughnut," said Scott Faber, a former Environmental Defense lobbyist now with the Grocery Manufacturers Association.

"Large-scale corporate farmers are going to continue to win, and here we are basically begging for peanuts," said John Boyd,

president of the National Black Farmers Association.

Farm aid "should be for all farmers, and not for those who are politically savvy, and not for those who hire law firms and form corporations and form partnerships and all of this stuff," Boyd said. "Everybody knows what's going on, including the leaders of the Senate, but they refuse to take on those interests and individuals and do the right thing and put a stop to it."

The bill faces several challenges on the Senate floor, where it is expected to be debated through next week. One by Sens. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., and Frank Lautenberg, D-N.J., would do away with current crop subsidies and provide free insurance for all farmers. They would divert the estimated \$16 billion in savings to programs the critics favor.

And Sens. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., and Charles Grassley, R-Iowa, would keep subsidies intact but limit payments to any individual farmer to \$250,000 each a year. Both farm-state senators fear that millions of dollars in payments to large farms is undermining public support for farm programs.

Ken Cook, president of Environmental Working Group, said the farm bill "will be first and foremost a test of the leadership of the Democratic Party that now controls the Senate. ... They have to decide if they're the party of big agriculture or not."

California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, both

Democrats, have not yet taken positions on the bill.

"I think it's real clear that Boxer and Feinstein are really crucial swing votes," said Mark Lipson, policy program director for the Organic Farming Research Foundation in Santa Cruz. "It could really come down to them making the difference."

Faber said environmental groups were targeting Boxer, a longtime environmental advocate who chairs the Environment and Public Works Committee.

"You have a drought in California," Faber said, noting that some of the state's subsidized cotton acreage also gets federal water subsidies. "Aren't you guys going to be voting on new infrastructure to increase access for water?"

Boxer, he said, "ought to be concerned about this. Water is going to be the next crisis in the West. We all see it. So why should we use water to produce a commodity that is in surplus and actually works against our interests? It does not make any sense."

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