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Niche farmers seek policy change

Organic growers lobby lawmakers in D.C. before House maps out a farm bill.

By Michael Doyle / Bee Washington Bureau
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WASHINGTON -- John Teixeira's tomatoes need him now. Politically, that's rather inconvenient.

In the San Joaquin Valley, Teixeira's organically tended tomatoes are ready for picking. But on Capitol Hill, the House Agriculture Committee is poised in coming days to divvy up billions of dollars in a new farm bill that Teixeira wants to reform.

The resulting conflict forced the Firebaugh-based farmer to straddle the continent this week, catching a red-eye to lobby lawmakers in Washington even as he monitored his California crops by cell phone.

"I wish I was there," Teixeira said in a congressional cafeteria Wednesday morning. "This is a real hard time for a grower to come back here."

With the House panel planning to write its farm bill over the course of three days next week, Teixeira and several dozen other organic farmers are taking a desperate stab at changing the course of federal agricultural policy. So far, success is elusive.

Existing cotton, rice, wheat and corn subsidies would stay essentially the same under the current bill written by the Agriculture Committee chairman, Rep. Colin Peterson, D-Minn. Federal crop subsidies totaled about \$17 billion last year.

In California, farmers received \$1.1 billion in direct payments between 2003 and 2005, according to figures compiled by the Environmental Working Group. The Sacramento Valley rice growers and San Joaquin Valley cotton growers who receive the biggest payments have had little incentive to change the current program.

The politically vocal American Farm Bureau Federation likewise supports Peterson's stay-the-course approach to traditional subsidies, as does the National Milk Producers Federation.

"This is a last gasp, or last grasp, to try to maintain the commodity programs," University of California at Davis agricultural economist Dan Sumner said of the House bill.

Sumner allies himself with California's fruit and vegetable growers, who seek a bigger share of the farm bill.

The bill coming before the House committee next Tuesday does boost some specialty crop funding. For instance, it adds \$200 million in specialty crop research over five years, and provides an additional \$200 million in block grants helping states promote specialty crops.

Even so, specialty crop advocates -- and organic growers in particular -- complain the current House bill shortchanges the fastest-growing sector of U.S. agriculture.

"We are looking for a niche," said Cindy Lashbrook, a Merced County organic farmer who grows blueberries and almonds near Livingston. "We're looking to be legitimized, in a way."

The grass-roots lobbying by Lashbrook and Teixeira this week came at a relatively late stage in the farm bill drafting. This complicates their ability to make changes, with Lashbrook acknowledging Wednesday that "a lot are throwing up their arms and saying there's not much they can do."

MORE INFORMATION

Merced Co. farmer Cindy Lashbrook

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At the same time, Peterson faces serious political hurdles outside of the generally sympathetic confines of the 46-member House Agriculture Committee. Reform-minded lawmakers led by Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., will pounce with their own amendments when the farm bill reaches the House floor in late July. Kind wants to replace traditional crop subsidies with a new farmer savings account that covers losses during bad years.

Others want to tightly limit the subsidy amount farmers can receive. Pressure to boost overall farm bill funding could lead some lawmakers to seek exemptions from new budget requirements that spending be offset.

Potentially, House leaders could try to fend off these various rebellions by refining the bill after it's been written by the House Agriculture Committee next week but before it reaches the House floor.

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