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Farm bill negotiators say they have agreement

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Negotiators on a five-year, \$300 billion farm bill say they have reached a tentative agreement on the legislation and it will be considered by the House and Senate next week.

But the Bush administration has objected to the bill, and the White House says it seems unlikely that Congress will pass farm legislation the president can sign. President Bush has said the bill is "bloated" with farmer subsidies in a time of record crop prices and is too expensive.

Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, said after meetings Wednesday that the negotiating is finished, but he acknowledged that some minor issues remain unresolved.

The agreement is the latest of several proposed frameworks that have been renegotiated after the White House or other members of Congress signaled opposition.

The agreement moved Congress closer to the White House on the amount of government subsidies that would be directed to wealthy farmers, an issue that has been a sticking point for months.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss, the top Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, said the agreement would eliminate some government payments to individuals who make more than \$750,000 in farm income annually, which would be closer to the White House's proposal on limiting subsidies. Those who make more than \$500,000 in non-farm income would also be ineligible for subsidies.

The Bush administration originally proposed a cap for those who make more than \$200,000 in annual gross income, but has indicated it could accept a limit of \$500,000. As of last week, negotiators were considering a \$950,000 income cap on farm income.

The \$750,000 cap could also be seen as a \$1.5 million cap for a married couple if both individuals are farmers, as the payments are attributed to individuals.

While lawmakers met privately in attempts to appease Bush, his administration worked to rally conservatives who oppose the bill.

Grover Norquist, president of the anti-tax group Americans for Tax Reform, said an administration official criticized the bill at a breakfast attended by conservatives Wednesday morning. Another person who attended the meeting said the official was Deputy Agriculture Secretary Charles Conner, who said Bush was likely to veto the bill.

Norquist said a veto of the farm bill would be popular among the conservative ranks and could help the president solidify his party's position this November. Conservatives believe "this is a fight worth having," said Norquist.

White House spokeswoman Dana Perino said Bush remains concerned that negotiators have not come close enough to his positions on the bill.

"But members of Congress have continued to work on it, and if they can get there, the president would sign it," Perino said. "But it seems unlikely, and therefore the president would call on them to pass a one-year extension if they can't get to a point where they would pass a bill that he could sign."

Virginia Rep. Bob Goodlatte, the top Republican on the House Agriculture Committee, said he met with Bush Wednesday morning and again encouraged him to support the bill.

Bush criticized the legislation but did not speak in specifics, Goodlatte said, and acknowledged that some Republicans would have to vote with their farm-based districts in favor of the measure, even if the White House vetoes the bill.

"We think there is a great deal to be said about the fiscal responsibility in this bill," Goodlatte said.

Two-thirds of the legislation is nutrition programs, including food stamps. Lawmakers agreed last month to provide more than \$10 billion extra over 10 years for those programs.

The bill would also expand subsidies for several crops and create new grants for vegetable and fruit growers.

The legislation would also increase loan rates for sugar producers, extend dairy programs and provide more dollars for renewable energy and conservation programs to protect environmentally sensitive farm land.

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