

Congress considers bill to help farmers in wake of continuing drought

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By

CLEVELAND, Ohio -- Ohio won't see much rain in the coming week, but farmers could still get drought relief in the form of expanded crop insurance if Congress can pass a new farm bill before the current one expires on Sept 30.

With much of the state experiencing moderate to extreme drought conditions, Joe Cornely, a spokesman with the Ohio Farm Bureau Federation, said farmers can take advantage of the federally-backed program that gives them some protection against weather loss or conditions beyond their control.

"There are federal programs, but to be honest, they are very small and they tend not to be extremely helpful," Cornely said. "We no longer have a federal farm disaster program. That went away with the requirement that farmers buy more crop insurance in 2011."

Democrats and Republicans in the House and Senate are split over details of what a new farm program would include -- GOP leaders think the food stamp program should be reduced, and Democrats reject the idea of only a short-term solution. The Associated Press reported that the House dropped a bill containing a one-year extension Tuesday in favor of pursuing immediate help for farmers affected by the drought. The bill being debated in the Senate suggested a five-year extension.

Republican Sen. Rob Portman said in a statement that he'd only support the bill if the House will send back one that is more "fiscally responsible."

"I had hoped to vote for this farm bill because I think there are some responsible reforms to a number of the farm commodity programs," Portman said. "Unfortunately, despite my efforts to improve the bill by supporting numerous amendments, the Senate refused to scale back the food stamp entitlement program, a program that doubled under



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Associated Press

Drought-damaged corn in Westfield, Ind. on Wednesday. More than half of U.S. counties now are classified by the federal government as natural disaster areas mostly because of the drought.

the Obama administration, now representing 80 percent of the cost of the overall bill."

Democratic Sen. Sherrod Brown said in a conference call that the entitlement program serves a significant amount of people in need the support. He also said he thinks a five-year extension is the best way to establish certainty for farmers.

"In the end, farmers want a reliable safety net that can protect them in situations of drought and situations of low prices and deal with disasters," Brown said. "Short-term solutions don't do that well."

Both parties agree that farmers need disaster relief given this summer's poor crop conditions. The Senate and House bills both restore the disaster-relief program phased out in 2011, the Associated Press reported.

The Senate bill proposes, among other things, eliminating direct payments to farmers who didn't grow a crop, increasing disaster support to dairy and livestock farmers, streamlining conservation efforts and furthering renewable energy projects and research. The bill states that it will save taxpayers \$23 billion, and the Associated Press reported it will cost about \$100 billion per year.

Matt Stoll, of Maple Lane Farms in Marshallville, said the crop insurance program gives farmers and consumers stability, and he supports keeping the program in place. Stoll and his family grow corn, soybeans and wheat and raise cattle.

"There used to be wild, wild swings in food prices, and the consumer can't stomach that, and farmers, too, need stability," Stoll said. ". . . It's not a big money-maker, but it keeps everybody going forward."

The Associated Press also reported that farm groups and the Obama administration are urging the House to act so farmers can get some relief as soon as possible.

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