

## Farm Bill Expiration Looms as Congress Seeks Path to Conference, Vital Funding Hangs in the Balance

Article By:

W. Kam Quarles

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The U.S. House of Representatives and Senate are wrestling with how to rewrite the nation's food and agriculture policy through a new Farm Bill. After the previous bill expired last year, Congress provided a partial extension on January 1 that has kept most programs operating. That stopgap measure will expire at the end of the fiscal year on September 30. If no successor Farm Bill is agreed upon, it will jeopardize a host of programs, including vital funding for the beer and wine industries.

Seeking to avert another extension or an outright expiration, in June the Senate passed a complete Farm Bill (S. 954) that achieved \$24 billion in savings and made significant reforms to a variety of programs. But one week later, the House could not address concerns over the size of nutrition cuts and saw its version (H.R. 1947) go down to a rare defeat on the floor. In July, House leaders returned to the floor with an abbreviated Farm Bill (H.R. 2642) that omitted the nutrition title and gained the necessary votes for passage.

Within the Farm Bill, the Market Access Program has been funded at \$200 million annually since 2006 and has served to build and maintain overseas markets for America's beer and wine industry. This necessary and highly effective program seeks to counter foreign government promotion of their alcohol beverage sectors. Should the Farm Bill expire, this funding would immediately cease.

Other programs in jeopardy include research, specialty crop block grants and vital pest and disease exclusion activities. Under the current extension, the Specialty Crop Research Initiative (SCRI) – a dedicated program for the specialty crop industry that provides significant funding to the winegrape industry – was left entirely without funding. Research funded via SCRI is slowly winding down due to those missing federal resources.

Congress has not yet established when and how to resolve differences between the two bills. The Senate and House *theoretically* could move immediately to conference, despite the nutrition title's absence from the House version. But that would likely upset interests who thought the House's original \$20.5 billion in cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) was too small. That amount was five times larger than the Senate's \$4 billion in SNAP cuts. At present, the Senate Democrats have announced their members for a conference committee, while the Senate

Republicans and the House are yet to appoint theirs.

Regardless of the policy issues, the clock is ticking. When Congress returns from their August recess, they will have less than ten legislative days before the end of the fiscal year to address the future of the Farm Bill and a host of essential programs it governs.

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