

Farm Policy To Be Issue For 2000

WASHINGTON, D.C. (AP) — Chairmen of key congressional committees disagree on whether farm policy should be overhauled, but some lawmakers predict at least some tinkering with the market-oriented policies that became law in 1996.

"I think there's enough desire on the part of my farm-state colleagues to make changes," said Rep. Jo Ann Emerson, R-Mo., a member of the House Appropriations agriculture subcommittee.

She applauded Agriculture Committee Chairman Larry Combest, R-Texas, for scheduling hearings on farm policy from February through March in Washington and seven to 12 regions nationwide.

Shrinking export markets have sent prices for wheat, corn, soybeans and other crops plummeting, and the Agriculture Department forecast for 2000 is bleak, too. Farm income is predicted to drop \$7.6 billion next year to \$40.4 billion, unless Congress takes the unlikely step — because it is an election year — of another multibillion-dollar bailout.

"We're looking at the third year in a row of a disastrous ag situation," Combest said in a recent interview. "We've got to look at this. Something is not working."

Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman agreed, saying Congress has lurched from one patchwork emergency bill to the next. His comments came in October on the heels of an \$8.7 billion emergency aid package.

"And we shouldn't wait until the expiration of the farm bill in 2002," Glickman said. "The fact is, with two years of emergency payments to farmers, Congress has already seriously amended the farm bill. What is needed now is a thought-out, well-balanced farm bill that we can work on if we address it early in the year — before we are looking again at emergency farm legislation."

Trouble is, there's not much consensus in Congress or among the major farm interest groups on what should be done.

Combest Senate counterpart, Agriculture Committee Chairman Dick Lugar, R-Ind., has no plans for hearings because he believes there is no need to change farm policy. Several farm-state Democrats, meanwhile, will be pushing to boost U.S. farm subsidies as a tool in trade negotiations with the Europeans.

Sen. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., said change in farm policy, even before

the current law expires in 2002, is inevitable. Citing statements by Glickman and by President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore, Roberts said the question is not whether Freedom to Farm will be rewritten, but when and how.

Roberts, who as House Agriculture Committee chairman was chief author of the 1996 reforms, argues it is disingenuous to blame the farm bill for a failing safety net

when its components — a crop insurance overhaul, aggressive trade policies and regulatory and tax reforms — were never put in place.

Not only the administration but GOP leaders in Congress have failed, he said. This year, Roberts plans to introduce his own package that incorporates those elements as an alternative to rewriting farm policy.

"It's like Freedom to Farm was the horse you wanted to ride in the Derby, but you hobbled him first — there's no jockey, no saddle and all the rest," he said. "We said these component parts had to be part of the policy or this wouldn't work."

Many regard trade issues as having the best potential to shore up struggling farmers.

One of the administration's top

priorities in a new round of global trade talks is to get the European Union to lower its farm subsidies. EU farm supports are worth \$324 per acre, compared with \$34 for the United States, according to the Agriculture Department. Canada and Australia are even lower.

Combest said his House panel also will consider proposals for bolstering U.S. export programs to counter European crop subsidies.

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