

Updates made to 2013 Farm Bill

Written by Holyoke Enterprise

The Senate Agriculture Committee recently unveiled an updated draft of the 2013 Farm Bill and announced it would begin consideration of the bill next week. The bill includes several key provisions secured by Colorado U.S. Senator Michael Bennet to help Colorado farmers and ranchers and rural Coloradans.

The Bennet-backed measures included in the draft bill aim to improve key programs for Colorado producers, support programs rural Coloradans depend on and help address the most important issues facing Colorado farmers and ranchers.

“Colorado farmers and ranchers have been waiting far too long for Congress to pass a long-term Farm Bill,” Bennet, a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, said.

“This is a bipartisan bill that would save taxpayer dollars, add efficiency and provide support and certainty for producers, small business entrepreneurs, land managers and community food organizations continuing the important work of feeding our country. The bill was also influenced and informed by Coloradans and takes into account what we’ve heard from producers across the state by including tools, resources and reforms that will help them meet the challenges they’re facing in the fields.”

The Farm Bill, which is supposed to be reauthorized every five years, renews the programs that govern national agriculture, nutrition, conservation and forestry policy. The 2008 Farm Bill expired on Sept. 30 and has been operating on a short-term extension.

The 2013 Farm Bill draft reforms farm policy, consolidates and streamlines programs and would reduce the deficit by tens of billions of dollars. The draft bill is scheduled to be marked up in the Senate Agriculture Committee next week.

Building upon the Senate’s work in the last Congress, Bennet secured a number of important changes to current agriculture and conservation policies.

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The draft bill strengthens the federal crop insurance program by expanding the kinds of crops that are covered under the program and making the program more accessible for young farmers.

It includes a bill Bennet introduced earlier this week to provide a more stable flow of resources for the National Animal Health Laboratory Network, which monitors animal-borne illnesses that pose significant threats to animal and public health, such as mad cow disease and foot-and-mouth disease. The Animal and Public Health Protection Act creates a unique funding authorization for NAHLN, which will help protect the network against the uncertainty of Congress' yearly budgeting process.

Bennet also pushed the committee to include changes to the USDA Rural Development programs based on the advice of Dr. Flo Raitano of Dillon. Raitano spoke to the committee in February 2012 about how technical assistance providers can boost the accessibility and effectiveness of USDA Rural Development programs.

The Senate accepted her advice to allow recipients of assistance under the Community Facilities Programs to partner with technical experts as they work to carry out their projects. This provision will help ensure that taxpayer dollars are used efficiently and effectively.

Bennet also worked to develop a forestry title that will help maintain healthy forests in Colorado. The updated draft includes two bills Bennet previously introduced earlier this year. The National Forest Insect and Disease Treatment Act would create a program to designate new national forest acreage suffering from insect and disease epidemics for expedited treatments. The areas treated through the program would prioritize the preservation of old-growth and large trees, if possible, as well as wilderness areas, while still promoting forests that are resistant to insect and disease damage.

Also included in the bill is Bennet's Permanent Stewardship Contracting Authority Act, which would permanently reauthorize nationwide Stewardship Contracting authority for the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. The contracts support public-private partnerships that create Colorado jobs, reduce fuel loads on public lands and allow the private sector to turn the problem of excess biomass into profit.

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Other Bennet priorities in the bill include:

—a simplified conservation title that provides greater flexibility to producers.

—emphasis not only on water quality but also water quantity as a priority for the Natural Resources Conservation Service, which administers Farm Bill conservation programs.

—permanent livestock disaster assistance, which expired in 2011, that will compensate ranchers for losses incurred in 2012 and going forward.

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