

Midterm Elections 2010: Implications for Food Systems Policy

By Kate Fitzgerald, FFN Senior Policy Advisor



Immediate Implications — Child Nutrition:

The prospects for House passage of the Senate's Healthy, Hunger-free Kids Act (also known as Child Nutrition Reauthorization) are looking up. Congressional staffers believe that it could be one of the things that will be voted on during the lame duck session. The Administration has said that its passage is a priority, and House Democratic leaders who had opposed how the bill will be paid for have dropped their objections. While advocates are pleased with the many improvements the bill makes, particularly to the school meals programs, the cost of the reforms will come from reducing the amount of time that stimulus-funded increases to SNAP (food stamp) benefits will be in effect. Although this has been a bitter pill to swallow, more than 1,200 nutrition, school, agriculture, health and anti-hunger organizations signed onto a letter that was delivered to members of the House of Representatives calling for speedy passage of the bill.

Farm Bill

House

Representative Collin Peterson (D-MN), the outgoing chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, held a series of hearings around the country in 2010 in preparation for the drafting of the next Farm Bill in 2011. Presumptive House Ag Chairman Representative Frank Lucas (R-OK) has said that he thinks the nation's economic condition will improve and that he will not begin serious Farm Bill deliberations until 2012. There is a real debate in the production agriculture world now about the merits of direct payments, a type of farm support that some commodity farmers (like corn and soybean) receive even when crop prices are high. Representative Lucas is a strong supporter of direct payments, but powerful voices in some mid-western states think that they are hard to justify, especially in a time of serious budget cutting. It will be interesting to see where new tea party members come down on farm programs since they are generally opposed to government intervention in the marketplace. Direct payments account for about \$5 billion a year in spending.

Sixteen of the twenty-eight House Agriculture Committee Democrats lost their seats in the election. The new party breakdown of the Committee will probably be approximately 28 Republicans and 18 Democrats, meaning that several new Democrats will join the Committee. If new Democrats joining the Committee represent urban or suburban districts they could ally with fiscally conservative anti-farm program Republicans and present a formidable challenge to Lucas. Interestingly, presumptive Speaker of the House Boehner has been a critic of farm programs in the past.

The fiscal crisis creates real challenges for the Agriculture Committee. GOP leadership has promised \$100 billion in cuts in 2011, and on December 1st the President's budget deficit commission will offer its ideas, which will almost certainly include recommendations to cut farm programs. Since SNAP (food stamps) and other nutrition programs absorb more than 70% of farm bill spending representatives will almost certainly look to make cuts in these benefits as happened under similar circumstances in 1996.

Senate

The Senate Agriculture Committee's future is not completely clear. The presumption has been that Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND) would retain his Budget Committee Chairmanship leaving the way open for Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) to assume leadership of the Committee. Senator Stabenow has signaled her interest but Senator Conrad has not clearly said that he is not interested in the position. He will be up for re-election in 2012, and his race is one that the Republicans will almost certainly target. He may feel that he has to take over the Agriculture Committee now and be shown clearly to be serving North Dakota to protect his seat. Senator Ben Nelson of Nebraska could also be in line for the job.

Appropriations

The next political opportunity for food systems advocates will be the 2012 appropriations process, which will begin very soon after the swearing in of the new Congress. The President will submit his budget to Congress in the first week of February, letters from members with their priorities will be due to the respective bodies' Appropriations Committees in late February or March, and then deliberations will begin. Congress has not passed a FY 2011 budget yet, and the government is still operating under a Continuing Resolution, but that will not halt the usual process, even if it doesn't get very far.

USDA: A newly empowered House Republican leadership may concentrate on investigating Administration department heads over the next couple of years, bringing them up to the Hill to explain how they are implementing agency programs. At the same time, progressive advocacy groups will pivot and turn their attention to program improvements that can be made through administrative rather than congressional changes.

USDA has been taking a lot of heat from "production agriculture" and conservative rural legislators accusing it of abandoning its primary constituency and pandering to peripheral agricultural groups. One way advocates can counter these attacks is to concentrate on the economic growth potential created by regional food systems. The regional food story includes all the iconic cultural symbols of traditional American farming and rural communities. Advocates should emphasize that is it not an either/or discussion but a both/and opportunity. The White House supports this work, but conventional agriculture still holds an enormous amount of power. The more comfortable they can be made to feel with regional food systems ideas, the less likely they will be to oppose them forcefully.