

Election unlikely to change US farm subsidies

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In this Oct. 6, 2010 file photo, soy beans are harvested near Walton, Neb. Republicans might take control of Congress as they ride a wave of voter anger over deficit spending and big government, but experts who follow agriculture say they don't expect deep cuts in subsidies to farmers who grow crops such as corn and soybeans. (AP Photo/Nati Harnik)

(AP) -- Republicans might take control of Congress as they ride a wave of voter anger over deficit spending and big government, but experts who follow agriculture say they don't expect deep cuts in subsidies to farmers who grow crops such as corn and soybeans.

Those payments are long-entrenched policy that have had the support of a wide range of lawmakers, from liberal to conservative. Regardless of the election results, that likely won't change much, politicians and other said.

Still, federal [farm](#) programs could be examined closely given the size of the deficit and the chance that the election could change the makeup of the agriculture committees and their leadership.

"It's going to be a bit of a roller coaster on election night from an agriculture perspective," said Tara Smith, a director of congressional relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation.

But Rep. Collin Peterson, a Minnesota Democrat who chairs the House Agriculture Committee, said he doubts anyone on the panel would push to cut overall spending in the next Farm Bill. It will be a five-year package that includes crop subsidies - primarily for corn, soybeans, cotton, wheat, peanuts and rice - and a range of other programs. The bulk of Farm Bill money goes to nutrition programs such as food stamps.

If Republicans take control of the House, Rep. Frank Lucas of Oklahoma could take over as chairman of the Agriculture Committee. Lucas declined an interview request, but Peterson said a change wouldn't make a big difference, except that Peterson is eager to start writing the 2012 Farm Bill next year while Lucas wants to wait.

"We're not going to have a bill unless Frank Lucas and I agree on it," Peterson said. "Whether he's chairman or I'm chairman, that's not going to change."

Likely to come under fire, however, are "direct payments," a \$5 billion a year subsidy that pays landowners a set per-acre amount regardless of what they're currently growing or whether prices are high or low. Prices for corn and other crops have soared lately.

The Iowa Farm Bureau made waves last month by calling for an end to direct payments, but it also proposed shifting the money to other programs that shield farmers from losses due to poor prices, bad weather

or diseases.

Direct payments are popular with Southern farmers, and Smith predicted some state Farm Bureaus will "wholeheartedly oppose" Iowa's proposal when the national group holds its annual meeting in January.

Although Peterson said Agriculture Committee members wouldn't support cuts in overall Farm Bill spending, he acknowledged critics of subsidies could attack the legislation when it comes before the full House and Senate.

Donald Carr, a spokesman for the Environmental Working Group, said he's waiting to see whether the election will affect the debate.

"Generally, Republicans have campaigned on less spending and smaller government. So it will be interesting to see if they gain control how they treat large farm operations and wealthy landowners who receive the bulk of lavish farm subsidies and demand more and more every year," said Carr, whose group tracks subsidies.

Don Koehler, executive director of the Georgia Peanut Commission, said local interests usually count for more than ideology.

"Some of the Georgia folks talk like tea party candidates. ... But if you're from a district that has peanuts you won't stay in Congress long if you start voting against farm bills or create problems for peanuts," Koehler said.

If Republicans take control of the House, House Republican Leader John Boehner of Ohio likely would become speaker. Although Boehner voted against the 2008 Farm Bill, Peterson said he doesn't expect him "to try to take apart farm programs" unless a majority of his caucus demands it.

Peterson said Boehner probably would put Republicans on the Agriculture Committee who would benefit politically, which means supporters of farm programs, not opponents.

"He's a practical guy. He's not going to put ideologues on there who are going to cause trouble," Peterson said.

A chairmanship change also could come in the Senate Agriculture Committee, where its leader, Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas, has been trailing in most polls.

If the GOP takes the Senate, the chairmanship likely would pass to Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., who opposed the Obama administration's attempt to cut the farm budget this year. Chambliss did not respond to an interview request.

Rep. Tim Walz, D-Minn., a House Agriculture Committee member, said he worries about cuts, but he noted that farm policy historically has been "far more of a regional than a partisan issue." Given that, he doesn't expect big changes.

Nor does Bryon Kittleson, who grows 500 acres of corn and soybeans west of Fairmont in southern Minnesota. He pointed out that since prices are high, some subsidy programs aren't paying out anyway. And he argued that subsidies are a key tool for keeping U.S. food prices relatively low.

"If agriculture doesn't thrive then the nation doesn't thrive," Kittleson said. "They will always find a way to have a cheap-food policy. If they cut subsidies and they see a reaction and it affects things adversely, they'll bring it back."

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