

Report from the Congressional Science Fellow

With all the museums and monuments, and the nonexistent farmland in our nation's capital, many would not believe how busy agriculture is in Washington, DC. From conservation to commodity payments, biofuels to research funding, agriculture is in full swing on Capitol Hill as members and staffers gear up to write a new Farm Bill for 2007. Signed into law on May 13, 2002, the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (Public Law 107-171), commonly referred to as the 2002 Farm Bill, is nearing its September 2007 expiration. Following the release of the US Secretary of Agriculture's proposal on January 31, 2007, everyone with a vested interest in the Farm Bill quickly lined up at the office door to fight for their piece of the budgetary pie.

In October 2006, I started my fellowship in the office of Congressman Marion Berry from the First District in Arkansas. The majority of this district is rural, and its economic balance depends greatly on agriculture. Arkansas is first in the nation in rice production, second in cotton, cottonseed, and broiler production, and third in catfish and turkey production. The First District is home to rice and cotton farmers primarily, because the rich Delta Region is quite suitable for the growth of these crops. Representative Berry, a pharmacist and a rice and soybean farmer, serves on the House Committee on Appropriations and the House Committee on Budget. Within the Appropriations Committee, Representative Berry serves on the Subcommittees of Energy and Water Development, Homeland Security, and Transportation.

My responsibilities include handing legislation as it pertains to all aspects of agriculture and alternative fuels. More specifically, I update the congressman on current issues, evaluate current legislation, and address questions and concerns of constituents. I meet regularly with constituents, special interest groups, and lobbyists, all of whom have a stake in some aspect of agriculture or alternative energy.

Currently, the biggest issue pertaining to the 2007 Farm Bill is USDA's proposed budget, which is \$89 billion over the duration of this legislation (FY2008 through FY2013). The majority (59%) of this money will support domestic nutrition assistance programs; 19% is allocated to farm programs, 11% goes to support conservation and forestry, and the remaining 11% goes to rural development, research, food safety, animal

and plant health, international programs, and administration. Some of the highlights of this proposal include a reformation of the commodity program aimed to save \$4.5 billion, an increase in conservation funding, and provision of \$1.6 billion in new funding for renewable energy research, development, and production. Additionally, \$5 billion will be provided to support specialty crop producers, spending for the protection of the food supply will be increased, and more money will be allocated to the development of rural America. Again, it is important to note that this is simply a proposal for the 2007 Farm Bill, and more concrete information will become available once the budget resolution is reached.

As the excitement revolving around the upcoming Farm Bill increases, it is proving to be a rewarding fellowship year here on the Hill. I have enjoyed serving as the FASS Congressional Science Fellow to date and am looking forward to the remaining months of my tenure here. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at ashley.peterson@mail.house.gov.

Please note: This report was prepared for the 2007 FASS Spring Newsletter, due for late April release.