

# Spokesman

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## Senate, House farm bill plans unveiled as talks kick off

BY TOM BLOCK

Farm bill talks picked up momentum last week as the House and Senate Agriculture Committees finally unveiled their latest plans for key commodity, conservation and crop insurance provisions.

The draft farm bill texts released by the committee chairs are similar to versions produced last year. The Senate passed its farm bill in 2012, but the legislation never made it to the House

floor for debate.

Both the Senate and House proposals released last week include commodity programs that provide revenue and price protection to complement crop insurance.

The 1,102-page Senate bill includes the Ag Risk Coverage (ARC) program with much of the same language included last year. Farmers would make a one-time choice to enroll in either individual coverage at 65 percent of planted acres or county coverage at 80 percent of planted acres.

The Senate proposal also maintains target prices under the new moniker Adverse Market Payments. Reference prices for the payments are kept at the same level as in the 2008 farm bill, except for peanuts and rice.

The House bill, meanwhile, offers farmers a choice between Price Loss Coverage (PLC) or Revenue Loss Coverage (RLC). PLC, which is the House's new name for target prices, is designed to address deep, multiple-year price declines and has higher ref-

erence prices than the Senate bill. RLC requires a farmer to experience at least a 15 percent loss, and the formula also considers county-wide losses in order to avoid duplication of crop insurance coverage.

Direct payments and the Average Crop Revenue Election (ACRE) program are eliminated in both proposals.

### Insurance changes

The Senate's crop insurance title calls for conservation com-

pliance to be tied to eligibility for federal crop insurance premium assistance, similar to language adopted last year. It also proposes reduced premium assistance for farmers with adjusted gross incomes above \$750,000.

Neither provision is included in the House bill.

Both the House and Senate versions would provide an additional 10 percent crop insurance premium assistance to beginning farmers. Both bills also main- **►► FARM BILL PAGE 2**

## Utility to boost Iowa wind power

MidAmerican Energy last week announced plans to add 656 new wind turbines, or 1,050 megawatts worth of wind power, in Iowa by the end of 2015. The investment by the Des Moines-based utility will be the largest ever in Iowa at \$1.9 billion.

The additional turbines will provide \$3.2 million per year in payments to landowners. The utility didn't announce where in Iowa the additional wind turbines would be installed.

Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad and Lt. Gov. Kim Reynolds applauded the MidAmerican announcement, saying it will create jobs and spur further economic activity.

"MidAmerican Energy has been a long-standing partner with the state of Iowa, and we look forward to working with them on this wind proposal," Reynolds said. "In addition to helping boost our state and local economies, the expansion would create approximately 460 construction jobs over a two-year period and an estimated 48 permanent jobs in our state."

MidAmerican said the wind power expansion will be built at no net cost to the ratepayers of the utility and no state incentives were used. However, the company did say that the recent extension of the federal wind power production tax credit was a key part of its expansion plan.

The utility said the added wind power will help to stabilize electricity rates by providing a rate reduction of \$10 million per year by 2017.

The expansion, which still must be approved by the Iowa Utilities Board, will add to the 1,267 turbines that MidAmerican has already installed in Iowa. Currently, MidAmerican owns and operates approximately 3,335 megawatts of wind generation capacity in the state and is the country's top wind-producing utility.



Tom Buman, right, of Agren visits with Carroll farmer Greg Haberl about the benefits of a no-till program. Agren's software application, which is designed to bring precision agriculture tools to soil conservation, showed that a no-till program would produce significant soil savings on Haberl's farm. PHOTO/GARY FANDEL

## Iowa firm brings precision tools to conservation

BY DIRCK STEIMEL

Precision farming is a given in today's Iowa agriculture. More and more farmers are employing high-tech tools, such as yield maps, GPS guidance and auto-steering systems, to boost yields and improve the efficiency in their corn and soybean fields.

Now a western Iowa envi-

ronmental consulting company, Carroll-based Agren, is developing a software application that uses precision tools to help farmers reduce erosion and save soil.

Agren's software application blends the data from Iowa's meter-by-meter elevation maps, called LiDAR, with more traditional soil-loss calculation formulas to pinpoint areas of each field that are most susceptible to soil loss. The

application, which is in the late, or beta, testing stage, can also help a farmer determine how effective different conservation practices, such as adopting no-till or building terraces, will be in reducing soil loss in each section of the field.

"It can really give you a much clearer picture of the conservation issues that you have in each

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### BRIEFS

#### COVER CROP GRAZING DEADLINE EXTENDED TO MAY 22

The USDA Risk Management Agency (RMA) last week provided new guidance that may allow farmers to continue to hay or graze cover crops until May 22, with their insurance company's permission. "It is critically important for farmers to work with their insurance provider and receive approval if they are interested in haying or grazing a cover crop past May 10," Iowa Secretary of Agriculture Bill Northey said.

The USDA had previously provided guidance to farmers interested in insuring a spring crop following a cover crop that they must not hay, graze or otherwise harvest the cover crop after May 10, and terminate the cover crop prior to planting the spring crop. However, wet and cold spring weather has delayed normal cover crop growth and spring planting preparations.



#### HOGBERG TO RETIRE FROM IOWA STATE

Maynard Hogberg will retire as chair of the Iowa State University (ISU) Department of Animal Science. He will continue to serve as chair until a search is completed. A search committee to find a new department chair will be led by Steve Mickelson, chair of the Department of Agricultural and Biosystems Engineering.

Hogberg, who grew up near Stanton, became department chair at Iowa State in 2003 after serving as chair at Michigan State University's Department of Animal Science for about 18 years. He joined Michigan State in 1976, serving as professor in animal science before being named chair. He was named a fellow of the American Society of Animal Science in 2010 and served as its president in 2006. Hogberg earned all his degrees at ISU.

### INSIDE

#### Crop insurance good for ag and taxpayers

Crop insurance is a far cry from the giveaway program that some critics claim.

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#### Attention to safety critical in compressed planting season

Farm safety is always important, but it is especially critical when farmers are under stress from delayed planting.

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#### FB funds animal care and ag entrepreneur programs at ISU

One grant will help encourage entrepreneurs to return to rural Iowa, and another supports the expansion of swine welfare training.

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#### Promoting healthy lifestyles for youth

Farmer-funded program promotes a balanced diet and activities for kids.

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## AGREN

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portion of your field,” said Tom Buman, who co-founded Agren with his brother, Stan, in 1996. “It’s really a precision conservation tool to go with the precision farming that people are using today.”

### Enhancing current tools

The Agren application is designed to enhance RUSLE2, the most widely-used tool to calculate soil loss, by combining it with the LiDAR data. RUSLE2 makes a determination of soil loss potential by measuring factors, like steepness of slope and length of slope, at a single point in the field, Buman said. But fields in Iowa are never perfectly flat and almost always contain areas, like hills and ridges, more prone to soil erosion.

“Our software looks at some 10,000 points in a 160-acre field and makes a calculation,” Buman said. “That way a farmer gets the soil loss calculation from the entire field, not just from a single spot.”

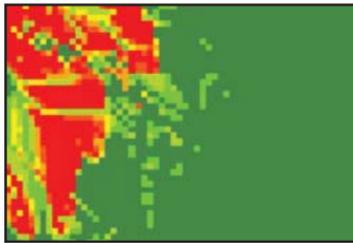
The tool will also help farm-



ers precisely locate areas of their fields where conservation practices are most needed, Buman said. “It will really show you where you can make the biggest impact from a conservation standpoint.”

The software creates a color-coded map, which looks very similar to a yield map. “It’s a visual picture that a farmer can quickly understand and see where his issues are,” Buman said.

The project to use the data from LiDAR, which stands for light detection and ranging, to aid soil conservation efforts was launched in 2008 by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship (IDALS). The state developed the LiDAR database using airplanes equipped with lasers that flew every inch of Iowa to precisely



A graphic generated from Agren's software program shows red and yellow areas that are more prone to soil erosion.

map the elevation of the entire state.

“Once we had the LiDAR data, it made sense to link them up with our soil conservation tools,” said Jim Gillespie, director of the IDALS Division of Soil Conservation.

The state agency contracted the efforts through the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) National Laboratory on Agriculture and Environment, which is on the Iowa State University campus. The USDA laboratory, in turn, subcontracted the software development to Agren, which works in a wide variety of environmental projects and issues with local, state and federal agencies, as well as cor-

porations, organizations, foundations and individuals.

### Nutrient strategy fit

In addition, Gillespie said, the tools to more accurately determine soil loss fit well with the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy. That strategy, unveiled in late 2012, was developed by the Iowa Department of Agriculture and Land Stewardship and the Iowa Department in Natural Resources, with a science assessment by Iowa State University. It is designed to provide voluntary strategies for farmers to maintain agricultural productivity, protect natural resources and reduce nutrient losses.

Buman said that the IDALS project to incorporate LiDAR data was very forward thinking because slope in fields is a critical part of a soil loss calculation. “It was really important for them to step up and get this done to help enhance conservation efforts.”

Another advantage of the Agren software is that it can help a farmer determine how much soil can be saved by implementing various conservation practices,

said Bob Buman, who works with his brothers at Agren. “We can plug in a practice, such as no-till or terraces, and see how that changes soil loss calculations,” he said.

### Information for farmers

That’s exactly the type of information that Carroll farmer Greg Haberl was looking for when he visited with Tom Buman recently. “We were looking to start some no-till to conserve moisture after last year’s drought,” he said. “This will really help us have the information we need to know what works and how we can improve the soil structure.”

The Agren software told Haberl that switching to a no-till program could significantly reduce the potential for soil erosion on the steeper slopes in his fields.

Both Buman and Gillespie envision a time when farmers, like Haberl, can access the soil loss data on their home computers. “I really think that it is the ultimate goal to make this a public data base that farmers could access and use to make informed conservation decisions,” Gillespie said.

## FARM BILL

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tain the Supplemental Coverage Option in the crop-insurance title of the farm bill, which allows farmers to buy county-based average yield insurance that would supplement their individual insurance policy.

Livestock supplemental disaster assistance is also reinstated in both versions.

The bills also consolidate 23 existing conservation programs into 13 programs and lower the number of acres enrolled in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The Senate brings CRP acreage down to 25 million acres, while the House caps it at 24 million acres.

The Senate draft doesn’t include national standards on cages for egg-laying hens that had been rumored as part of the bill. However, the so-called “egg

bill” (S. 820), which is strongly opposed by Farm Bureau and livestock groups, could be offered as an amendment in committee debate or on the Senate floor.

The overall farm bill budget continues to be one of the biggest differences between the House and Senate proposals.

The House bill reduces spending by \$40 billion, including \$20 billion in food stamp savings.

The Senate bill seeks a total of \$23 billion in savings. Various

reports suggest the Senate will take no more than 20 percent of those cuts — about \$4 billion — from nutrition programs, which account for 80 percent of the legislation’s cost.

### Conservation deal

Also last week, a far-ranging coalition of more than 30 conservation, crop insurance, environmental and agricultural groups announced a compromise agreement on conservation compliance and crop insurance in an effort to move farm bill talks forward.

The agreement links conservation compliance with crop insurance premium assistance on highly erodible land or wetland acres while opposing means testing, payment limitations or premium subsidy reductions for the crop insurance program.

The compromise was necessary given the political realities, and it helps Farm Bureau continue other farm policy goals, said American Farm Bureau Federation President Bob Stallman.

“Farm Bureau is convinced this agreement will move the farm bill forward,” said Stallman. “It is no secret that much of agriculture

fought the compliance amendment during last year’s Senate debate on the farm bill. But our desire to avoid a time-consuming and contentious debate with our long-standing partners on workable environmental stewardship programs helped build a consensus around rational provisions that protect farmers while furthering the conservation of natural resources.”

In the interest of completing a farm bill this year, each of the groups has committed not to support amendments beyond this compromise that might weaken the crop insurance program.

The Senate farm bill proposal includes both the conservation compliance link and premium subsidy reductions for high-income farmers.

Iowa Farm Bureau President Craig Hill said Iowa farmers need a new farm bill and the compromise signed onto by AFBF was a strategic step toward that goal.

“Our number one priority is protecting crop insurance; we need to keep that risk management tool in place and keep premiums affordable during this most difficult budget climate,” he said.

## Budget bills, property tax reform remain as Legislature nears close

As the session attempts to wind down, key budget bills are now in conference committee, as well as education reform, property tax reform and health care for Iowans. Discussions continue on property tax reform. Farm Bureau will continue to work to ensure that a reduction in one class of property doesn’t result in a shift to other classes of property and that reform should reduce the burden for all classes of property.

The House Government Oversight Committee introduced HSB240, which addresses the recreational use liability protections for private landowners, restoring the protections affected by Iowa Supreme Court ruling earlier this year. Farm Bureau members should continue to discuss this topic with their legislators and emphasize how important it is that the Legislature put these protections back into place so that landowners can continue to allow sportsman, snowmobil-



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ers and other visitors on their land without a major risk concern.

A bill to make the 911 surcharge on cell phones the same as landlines passed both houses last week and is on the governor’s desk. Currently, additional revenue for E911 compliance is generated from property taxes.

A bill was introduced to fund one-time appropriations for ag research and development and to close ag drainage wells. It would allocate \$7.5 million to support research and development in the areas of bioscience and Iowa’s bioeconomy at Iowa State University and \$1.62 million for the ag drainage well closure program.

