

New farm bill a boon for NM's farmers, ranchers, families in need

By Michael Coleman / Journal Washington Bureau



It took a couple of years, but Congress has finally passed major legislation to assist American farmers and extend the nation's food stamp program.

Perhaps most shockingly, they did it by a rare and wide bipartisan margin. The House approved the trillion dollar farm bill in late January by a 251-166 margin. The Senate followed suit last week, voting 68-32 to send it to President Obama's desk. All five members of New Mexico's congressional delegation voted for the bill.

The president signed the legislation into law in Michigan on Friday, meaning New Mexico farmers, livestock producers, food stamp recipients, rural counties and others can rest assured they'll get the federal assistance they have long relied on.

Maybe most important for heavily rural New Mexico is a provision in the law that will extend for one year a program commonly called PILT, or Payments in-Lieu of Taxes. The program provides payments to counties that have large tracts of federal lands (military bases, national forests, etc.) that aren't taxable. The one-year extension means New Mexico counties will receive about \$34 million dollars total this fiscal year.

As Kim Carpenter, executive officer of San Juan County in northwestern New Mexico, told me last month, PILT money accounts for about 6 percent of his county's budget.

"This isn't just something we hope for; it's something we need," Carpenter told me.

The bill also includes \$4 billion for disaster assistance that will now help livestock producers – in addition to farmers – harmed by New Mexico's severe drought.

"This bill extends disaster assistance to ranchers who have struggled with drought and were forced to cut back their herds," said Sen. Tom Udall in a statement. "It makes our dairies more competitive. It provides incentives for farmers and ranchers to conserve water and natural resources, which will help ensure our agriculture industry is strong for generations to come."

The bill also extends the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, commonly referred to as “food stamps,” to help low-income households buy groceries. The legislation will cut the program by \$8 billion. But that’s still much less than the \$40 billion House Republicans wanted. The cuts will affect food stamp recipients in 15 states but not New Mexico because of an arcane provision inserted into the new law that tied home heating assistance (the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program) to SNAP.

Under the law, SNAP recipients who receive a minimum of \$20 in LIHEAP aid can qualify for additional food stamps. The average New Mexico LIHEAP recipient gets more than \$20 in assistance each month, so the change won’t affect low-income New Mexicans.

Rep. Michelle Lujan Grisham, a Democratic member of the House Agriculture Committee, said while she was relieved New Mexicans won’t be affected, she was disappointed that hungry kids in other states will. “Congress should be expanding nutrition assistance, not slashing it,” she said.

New Mexico will also get rewarded for the array of delicious specialty crops it produces, including chiles, pecans, apples, and other fruits and vegetables. The bill increases block grants for growers of these kinds of crops to \$72.5 million from the previous \$55 million. New Mexico’s share will increase to almost \$600,000 per year.

“Farmers, dairy producers and ranchers help drive New Mexico’s economy and have shaped our state’s history as many growers come from families that have cultivated land for generations,” said Sen. Martin Heinrich, D-N.M., in lauding the bill.

Rep. Steve Pearce, R-N.M., supported the trillion-dollar legislation, too, although he had earlier supported food stamp cuts of \$40 billion instead of \$8 billion.

“We need the Farm Bill,” Pearce said. “It protects New Mexico ranchers and farmers. It provides for New Mexico families in need. It supports our communities, teachers and police. New Mexicans desperately need the solutions for nutritional and agricultural support in this legislation.”

New Mexico lawmakers, including Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, a Democrat who represents northern New Mexico, successfully pushed their colleagues to include language to help acequia and community ditch associations to form partnerships and apply for federal grants through a U.S. Department of Agriculture Environmental Quality Incentive Program. They could not do so before.

“We greatly appreciate the work of our congressional delegation to improve acequia eligibility for conservation programs,” said Paula Garcia, Executive Director of the New Mexico Acequia Association, in a statement provided to the Journal. “Investment in agriculture will expand the availability of locally grown food, and support the livelihood of farmers and ranchers in New Mexico’s acequia communities.”

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