

Legislative Update: Congress Approves 2018 Farm Bill Conference Report

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On December 10, Congress released the long awaited 2018 farm bill conference report, H.R. 2 *The Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018*, a bipartisan compromise package that authorizes farm programs and agricultural research through fiscal year (FY) 2023. The final farm bill package, totaling 807 pages, is budget neutral. Title VII, the Research Title, largely reflects the Senate bill, reauthorizing signature programs and creating several new competitive research opportunities such as the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority and urban agriculture.

Controversial provisions unrelated to the research programs that had derailed conference negotiations earlier in the Fall were not included in the final package, namely the House provision to increase work requirements for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Senate provision limiting farm subsidies. At the time of writing, the Senate adopted the final conference report by a vote of 87-13 and the House is scheduled to vote on the package.

The final package provides \$185 million in mandatory funding for the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR), a compromise between the Senate bill that reauthorized FFAR at the current level of \$200 million and the House bill which did not provide funding. The farm bill also includes several of the Senate bill's provisions that requires FFAR to annually publicize upcoming research priorities, as well as posting its annual report online to improve transparency at the Foundation. The explanatory statement indicates funding will be contingent upon FFAR's submission of a strategic plan that focuses on financial sustainability and fundraising. Additionally, the conference committee directs FFAR to coordinate research planning with other federal research agencies and that the strategic plan documents consultation with the Secretary of the US Department of Agriculture to avoid duplication.

The final farm bill package would reauthorize several programs at the current levels until 2023, including: the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI); aquaculture assistance program; the rangeland research program; and the non-land grant college of agriculture (NLGCA) capacity building grants program. Other programs, like the biosecurity planning and response initiative, were reauthorized at an increase of \$10 million for a total of \$30M annually and expanded to permit the use of cooperative agreements to coordinate tactical sciences research. Additionally, the agricultural genome initiative was expanded to include the phenome and is authorized at \$40 million annually, a level which is \$10 million more than the House and Senate bills provided.

Title VII of the final farm bill package includes several new competitive research programs, most of which were included in the Senate bill:

- Authorizes a New Beginning for Tribal Students program at \$5 million per year;

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- Authorizes a new Next Generation Agriculture Technology Challenge competition at \$1 million annually to incentivize the development of mobile technology on bridging the gap between new farmers and ranchers;
- Authorizes the Agriculture Advanced Research and Development Authority (AGARDA) through the USDA Office of Chief Scientist. The conference report broadens the Senate's proposed pilot program, directing AGARDA to utilize other transaction authority (OTA), as well as contracts and grants and increasing the annual authorization to \$50M per year from the Senate bill which provided \$10 million. The explanatory statement emphasizes that the establishment of AGARDA is not intended to change how existing agricultural research programs are funded and implemented.
- Authorizes a new Urban, Indoor, and Other Emerging Agricultural Production Research, Education, and Extension Initiative, "Urban AG" pilot program, including competitive research and extension grants, as included in the Senate bill. Additionally, it creates a new Office and Director of Urban Agriculture and Innovative Production, as well as an advisory committee consisting of 12 members. With respect to funding, the conference report authorizes \$10 million in mandatory funding from the Commodity Credit Corporation and \$10 million in annual discretionary funding.
- Authorizes a new program to build international agricultural research, extension and teaching capacity for developing countries working with international partner institutions at \$10 million annually.
- Establishes a new International Agricultural Education Fellowship program for eligible countries authorized at \$5 million annually.
- Creates an emergency citrus disease research and development trust fund that would be funded by the Commodity Credit Corporation at \$25 million annually. Additionally, the specialty crop research initiative was expanded to include pollinators, microbiome, emerging and invasive species.
- Authorizes a research equipment competitive grants program authorized at \$5 million annually and a limitation of \$500,000 max award per institution.
- Establishes the Pollinator Health Task Force, which was originally established through Executive Order during the Obama Administration. The final bill directs the enhanced coordination of pollinator research health by the USDA Chief Scientist, including establishing a coordinator to oversee and coordinate federal research as recommended by the Pollinator Health Task Force and develop annual research priorities in several categories identified in the bill.
- Establishes a new competitive extension design and demonstration initiative authorized at \$5 million annually to support grants on "adaptive prototype systems for extension and education."

Several administrative changes were also included in the compromised bill. These include provisions from the House bill to increase the limitation on indirect costs from 22% to 30%, as well as a time and effort reporting requirement exemption for land-grant institutions. The final bill removes the universal matching requirement for competitive grants implemented in the 2014 farm bill instead reinstates the matching requirements in place prior to the 2014 farm bill. Note that the matching requirement is typically waived through appropriations and processes USDA has in place for research of national significance. The explanatory statement addresses the need to preserve the capability of the land-grant system through prohibiting the designation of additional land-grants, with minor exceptions.

Finally, the explanatory statement contains additional report language on the importance of human nutrition research, specifically on the aging population. This is a direct reference to the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) human nutrition research program and facilities, although ARS is not directly authorized in the farm bill.

Sources and Additional Information:

- The bill and joint explanatory statement is available at:
<https://docs.house.gov/billsthisweek/20181210/CRPT-115hrpt1072.pdf>.