

A missed opportunity

by *The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Welfare as we knew it ended years ago across the nation. But not for farmers. Congress has passed wasteful legislation that will set farm policy on the wrong course for five more years. The \$290 billion farm bill, which passed the House on Wednesday and sailed through the Senate on Thursday, comes as farm income hits an all-time high. Yet this bill does almost nothing to curb subsidies. Indeed, as Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis., pointed out on the House floor this week, through some creative accounting, a farm family could earn up to \$2.5 million a year and still get a government handout. The bill contains a tax break for owners of racehorses, \$170 million for salmon fishermen and extra help for farmers in Hawaii and Alaska. Even with commodity prices soaring, subsidies will increase for nearly every crop.

Kind, long a critic of farm policy, voted against the bill, as did other members of the Wisconsin delegation, Democrat Gwen Moore and Republicans Paul Ryan, Jim Sensenbrenner and Tom Petri. Unfortunately, Democrats Dave Obey, Steve Kagen and Tammy Baldwin voted in favor of it. In the Senate, Wisconsin Democrats Herb Kohl and Russ Feingold both supported the measure.

President Bush has vowed to veto this congressional goody bag, and he should make good on that promise.

Our complaints with this bill go beyond the simple waste of taxpayer money, long a Washington team sport. Farm subsidies distort domestic markets by favoring large agribusiness concerns over family farmers and undercut the economies of poor nations and international trade talks. Other nations look at America's rich handouts to farmers and wonder why they should lower trade barriers to their own markets.

Throughout the process, Kind fought for real reform, proposing stricter income limits and reducing direct payments for corn and soybean farmers while creating a new revenue-based safety net. Instead, the farm bill is Exhibit A for craven special interest politics.

"It's not a safety net; it's an entitlement program," Kind said. "It's a missed opportunity."

Perhaps Kind and other like-minded congressmen still can rally enough votes to defeat this wasteful and wrongheaded legislation. That will be tough, given that the margins in both houses were enough to override the expected veto. Unfortunately, welfare reform down on the farm may have to wait.

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