

Take bull by the horns

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The last time Congress wrote a farm bill in 2002, it showered billions of dollars on key farm states during an election year. The result was predictable: an out-of-whack program that sent the wrong economic signals, rewarded people who didn't need the help and wasted taxpayer dollars.

Now, Congress has a chance to get it right, and the House and Senate agriculture committees, where the bill-writing takes place, should be listening to Rep. Ron Kind, D-Wis.

A bill introduced Wednesday by Kind would create a framework for a saner system of farm support. Along with President Bush's own ideas, announced in January, there are sensible alternatives to the illogic of the current system.

But are the agriculture committees, led by Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., and Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, listening?

It would seem not. Peterson recently brushed aside Kind's bill with "we've been down this road before," saying it was "to some extent ideology run amok." An attitude like that is about as useful as a milk bucket under a bull. It's time for change. Half of all farm spending goes to just 22 congressional districts. And a new database compiled by the Washington-based Environmental Working Group showed that billionaires like Microsoft Corp. co-founder Paul Allen and Texas oil man Lee M. Bass were receiving subsidies meant for struggling farmers. The overly rich payouts have consequences beyond our shores: They are a key reason global trade talks stalled last year.

Kind and his co-sponsors, including Wisconsin Republican Reps. Paul Ryan and Tom Petri along with Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind., have a different idea.

In place of subsidies, the bill would phase in "income stabilization accounts" that farmers could draw on during hard times. Backers believe they can save \$55 billion over a decade compared with the current bloated system. The savings would be plowed into the federal food stamp program, renewable energy, rural development and other programs. The bill would replace the MILC program with dairy income stabilization accounts. Although MILC has been useful, the Kind proposal deserves serious discussion.

Unfortunately, there are signals that discussion will not occur. And that could well result in another expensive, poorly conceived bill. Farmers and taxpayers deserve better.

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