US Senate leaders see chance for farm bill vote
(Reuters)
By Charles Abbott

A month-long impasse over amendments to a five-year U.S. farm subsidy bill is near resolution, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said on Monday, as Congress began its final three weeks of the 2007 session.

"I think we're at a point where we should be able to do a farm bill by unanimous consent," said Reid, referring to an agreement on how to handle legislation.

Major initiatives for the new farm overhaul legislation include expansion of food stamp benefits, larger support for fruit and vegetable growers, more than $1 billion to encourage use of cellulose as a feedstock for biofuels, and the first-ever program to guarantee grain, cotton and soybean revenue to growers.

The White House has threatened to veto the Senate and House bills.

Senators have been deadlocked since early November over how many amendments should be allowed and what topics would be debated. More than 260 amendments were filed on issues including the estate tax, immigration reform and biofuels.

This late in the year, there is little chance lawmakers will send a final bill to President George W. Bush in 2007. It would be the third time in a row that a farm law was not completed in the targeted year.

Reid did not say how soon the farm bill would be called for action. An Agriculture Committee spokeswoman said there was no agreement at mid-afternoon on amendments for floor debate.

"There are a lot of people that would like to pass the farm bill, on both sides," Republican Leader Mitch McConnell said. "That usually produces the kind of environment in which things are possible." He said negotiations were ongoing to decide which amendments can be offered.

Written every few years, farm bills are omnibus legislation that control crop subsidy, land stewardship, public nutrition, export, agricultural research, and biofuels programs. More than 60 percent of spending under the new farm law would go to nutrition programs such as school lunch and food stamps.

Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union, said the Senate could pass a farm bill before year-end if there is an agreement to limit amendments.

"It would be a good Christmas present for rural America to get it done," he said.
Mary Kay Thatcher of the American Farm Bureau Federation said it would be impossible for Congress to complete work on the bill and send it to the White House this year.

Once the Senate passes its bill, negotiators from the House and Senate would meet in a conference to write a compromise bill, which then must be passed by both chambers. Conferences usually take weeks, and the resulting bill must be signed by the president before it can become law.

Farm groups have repeatedly urged Congress to wrap up work on a successor to the 2002 farm law. A letter by 15 farm groups to Senate leaders in mid-November said, "Farmers and ranchers need to have policy in place to make well-informed financing, cropping and marketing decisions."

"It (the new law) may send signals to plant one crop over another," Buis said. By late winter, growers usually decide which crops they will grow. Some make those decisions soon after harvest and perform preliminary field work.