House Agriculture Committee Chairman Collin Peterson had an upbeat outlook on prospects for quick action on the next farm bill in remarks Monday night at the Farm Journal Forum in Washington D.C. But Senate Agriculture Chairman Tom Harkin, speaking at the same event Tuesday morning, suggested a slower farm bill timeline.

Both men, however, are in agreement that a hard cap on farm program payments won't make it into the next farm bill. Both said the differences between the House and Senate versions of the farm bill are relatively minor. And both also agree that President Bush is unlikely to veto the measure.

Peterson told Brownfield he plans to stay in Washington D.C. through the holidays to ensure House and Senate Ag Committee staffs make progress toward a compromise bill. And he said the farm bill could be on the President’s desk by the end of next month, if the Senate passes its version of the farm bill before adjourning for the year.

"I mean, the end of January would be the most optimistic, but I think we could get that done," said Peterson.

Harkin, meanwhile, told Brownfield he’s confident the Senate will pass a farm bill before Christmas, even though the Senators have 40 amendments to work through. However, according to Harkin, getting the farm bill through a House-Senate conference could push the process beyond January.

"The last farm bill we didn't get through 'til, I think, February," Harkin said. "The one before that didn't come in until March, so this is nothing out of the ordinary."

One item Peterson is anxious to deal with in the House-Senate conference committee is payment limits. He said the real issue with farm program payments isn't how much money individual farmers receive. He pointed out 20% of U.S. farmers and ranchers produce 80% of the nation’s food. And Peterson said what the vast majority of Americans really want is to know that whatever farm payments the government makes actually go to ag producers, regardless of their size.

"This is a program that supports production agriculture," Peterson asserted. "This is not a program to transfer money from rich farmers to poor farmers or big farmers to little farmers," he added. "It's a program to put a safety net under production agriculture."

Peterson intimated a new definition of those "actively engaged" in agriculture might find its way into the next farm bill for the purposes of weeding non-farmers out of the farm program. And he also said Congress could redefine the term "farmers," at least for the purposes of receiving farm program payments.
Harkin, for his part, said significant changes to farm program payment limits have virtually no chance of becoming law. He noted a $250,000 hard cap on payments, like the current amendment co-sponsored by Iowa Republican Chuck Grassley and North Dakota Byron Dorgan, made it through the Senate five years ago, only to be stripped from the final farm bill in the House-Senate conference committee.

"And I can read the tea leaves - I know who the conferees are going to be," Harkin said. "So if you think there's going to be any big changes in payment limits you're sadly mistaken or you don't know your history."

Peterson also predicted that President Bush won't veto the farm bill. According to Peterson, doing so would hurt Republican lawmakers more than Democrats.

"I think it's going to be very hard for Republican members to explain back in their districts why the President is vetoing a bill that they helped put together," Peterson said.

Harkin went even further. When asked by Brownfield why he believed President Bush wouldn't veto the bill after repeatedly threatening to do so, Harkin denied that President Bush ever threatened to veto the Senate version of the farm bill.

"They did on the House bill, and that had to do with the revenue and how they got the revenue for the House bill," claimed Harkin. "But they have not said that about the Senate bill yet."

In fact, the Bush administration issued a Statement of Administration Policy (SAP) in early November that was harshly critical of the Senate farm bill. The SAP specifically opposed the Senate's revenue-generating mechanism for the farm bill. Indeed, Acting U.S. Ag Secretary Chuck Conner had this to say about the Senate farm bill on November 5th.

"This bill continues a defective safety net, contains little real reform, and uses tax increases and budget gimmicks to pay for priorities that deserve to be funded in an honest fashion."

Nevertheless, Peterson and Harkin aren't the only ones who believe President Bush would be making a mistake in vetoing whatever farm bill lands on his desk. National Farmers Union President Tom Buis told Brownfield the veto threat appears to limit areas of potential compromise between Congress and the administration.

"You don't always win in this process," Buis pointed out. "And because they're not getting everything they want doesn't mean it's not good legislation."

Former House Agriculture Committee Chairman Larry Combest, a noted Republican who is now a Washington D.C. lobbyist, told the Forum a Presidential farm bill veto would be "a political catastrophe." Like Peterson, Combest suggested Republican members of Congress would ultimately pay the price for such a step.
"It would be very unwise from a policy standpoint - I don't know what it is that they want to do," Combest said. "And from a political standpoint, I think that there are a number of members of the President's party in Congress, both the House and in the Senate, that are gonna find themselves in very precarious situations if they do."

Moreover, according to Combest, the Bush administration has no alternative to either the House or Senate farm bill. At least, Combest said, no alternative with any political viability.

"You know, you expect them to be a player in this and a partner in this, and they want to be players in the conference," Combest said. "But they haven't shown anything in reality, in my opinion, of what they would like to do, and certainly nothing that has any support at all."

For all those reasons, Combest said he expects President Bush to sign the next farm bill. He pointed out President Bush signed a much more costly farm bill in 2002, when Combest chaired both the House Ag Committee and the House-Senate conference committee that delivered the final version of the measure.