U.S. Congress may extend old farm law until March
(Reuters)
By Christopher Doering

The 2002 U.S. farm subsidy law should be extended until mid-March to preserve funding while Congress completes work on its $286 billion successor, heads of the House and Senate Agriculture committees said.

The short-term extension probably would be part of an omnibus spending bill to be passed in the next week or two, House Agriculture chairman Collin Peterson said on Wednesday.

"This provision will protect the budget we have for the farm bill that Congress is currently writing," said Peterson, a Minnesota Democrat.

Peterson said he was convinced by Georgia Sen. Saxby Chambliss, the Republican leader on the Senate Agriculture Committee, to extend the now-expired 2002 law. The Senate panel's chairman, Democrat Tom Harkin of Iowa, also supported the extension, a spokeswoman said.

Until now, Harkin and Peterson were leery of an extension.

"Chairman Harkin agreed to the short-term extension of the current farm bill to ensure that nothing falls through the cracks while we work on a new bill in Congress," said spokeswoman Kate Cyrul. "This need became more evident ... when economists realized we could lose billions from our baseline if anything were to lapse."

An extension funding most programs in the 2002 farm law was needed to avoid budgetary changes before the new law is enacted. Lawmakers would not extend the 2002 commodity support programs to the 2008 crop year.

"We've got assurances from the (Senate) leadership over there and the people on the committee that they are going to move, and we've got to get this done," said Peterson.

Republicans on the House Agriculture Committee said the 2002 law should be extended until September to give farmers more certainty as they plan their 2008 crops.

"My concerns are leaving farmers and ranchers at limbo," said Virginia Rep. Bob Goodlatte, the Republican leader on the House Agriculture Committee. "This is a problem that can't wait for working out a final farm bill."

Peterson said there is not enough support to extend the 2002 farm bill to September, and that doing so would actually create uncertainty for the future of some programs.

Senators began voting on farm bill amendments on Tuesday with hopes of passing the bill soon after. The House passed its farm bill in July.
Once the Senate passes its bill, negotiators from the House and Senate would write a compromise bill, which must be passed by both chambers before going to the White House. Conferences usually take weeks.

Peterson said he planned to move quickly once the Senate passed its version of the bill. "I'm not going to let us sit around for three or four weeks," he said. "I believe we can get this bill done by the end of January."