

Democrat Senators Hold On To Hope For New Farm Bill This Year

(Dow Jones Newswires)

By Bill Tomson

Several Democratic senators gathered Friday to tell reporters that there is still time this year for the Senate to approve its \$286 billion 2007 farm bill and then merge it with a House version and send it to the White House.

Democrats and a few Republicans in the Senate who wanted to break a filibuster blocking passage of the 2007 farm bill were delivered a blow Friday when a measure to invoke cloture and force a vote failed.

But Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, reversed earlier pessimistic forecasts, saying, "I want to assure everyone that we have not given up. This is just the first round."

Earlier Friday, before the cloture vote, Harkin warned: "It won't happen if we don't get cloture. If we don't get cloture, my friends, there probably won't be any farm bill."

Later, though, he told reporters a lot of negotiating would be taking place over the Senate's two-week Thanksgiving break.

"This bill is going to get done," he said, although he mentioned the possibility that it might "slip into next year" before that happens.

But Tom Buis, president of the National Farmers Union, said it would be best to get it done as soon as possible so farmers will know what kind of support they will be getting from the government.

The 2002 farm bill was scheduled to run out at the end of the 2007 fiscal year in September, but will continue to be extended until a new five-year farm bill can be implemented. The Senate's version of the 2007 farm bill - stretching from 2008 through 2012 - would give farmers new choices in subsidies, add about \$4 billion in new conservation funding, extend tariffs on ethanol imports and pay for research into improving domestic ethanol production.

Farmers are already "trying to plan what they are going to plant next spring," Buis said, and they "have no idea what the 2008 farm programs are going to be."

The Senate is scheduled to reconvene Dec. 4 and Harkin said he hopes to have a deal worked out with Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., on which amendments will be allowed for consideration for the farm bill. If no deal is reached, Harkin said, he will once again attempt to invoke cloture and force another vote.

The 2007 farm bill has been idle on the Senate floor for the past two weeks while senators have argued over potential amendments.

Sen. Saxby Chambliss, R-Ga., laid blame for the delay on the Democrats, saying in a prepared statement Friday they "are choosing which amendments will be offered to this bill by using parliamentary practices, which is simply not agreeable to my Republican colleagues and me."