

Leahy doubtful on Farm Bill passage
(Burlington Free Press, VT)
By Sam Hemingway

Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said Friday it is unlikely the stalled \$288 billion Farm Bill is passed before the end of the year, throwing into question an upgrade of a safety net program for dairy farmers and money to clean up Lake Champlain.

"Not good," Leahy said when asked about the bill's short-term prospects. "It's more likely we'll pass a continuing resolution extending the life of the current Farm Bill and then work to pass a new bill in January, if cooler heads prevail."

Leahy said the bill has plenty of support in the Senate but has been unable to win approval since it became the target of a filibuster earlier this month by Senate Republicans interested in tacking on unrelated amendments to the legislation.

"I'm not happy about this," Leahy said. "I'd like to get it done now. We're all frustrated."

The bill provides a blueprint and fund for a sweeping array of farm policies nationwide, from subsidies for certain crops to money for food stamps, organic farming, rural energy, environmental conservation, forest and farmland preservation.

Key provisions in the bill for Vermonters include an expansion of the MILC, or Milk Income Loss Contract program, and \$75 million to assist in ongoing efforts to improve the water quality of Lake Champlain.

On Nov. 16, progress on the bill ground to a halt in the Senate when it was unable to muster the votes to end a Republican filibuster. The vote was 55-42 in favor of ending the filibuster, five votes shy of the 60 votes needed to move forward on the bill.

Republicans, who Leahy said have employed filibusters more than 50 times this year, have said they are using the strategy to fight back against ill-advised Democratic spending plans.

Democrats say Republicans are afraid of having to defend another veto by President Bush in farm states. Bush, as well as some Democrats, want to reduce subsidy payments to rice and cotton farmers in predominantly pro-GOP states.

Leahy, in Vermont for the Thanksgiving Day weekend, said he will return to Washington on Monday and continue efforts to rally Republican support for the Farm Bill. "There's a lot of behind-the-scenes negotiating going on," Leahy said.

In the meantime, Leahy said Vermont dairy farmers can be comforted by the fact the MILC program is in existence at all. The program kicks in to help farmers when the price paid for their milk drops below the cost of producing it.

Leahy said he and others in the Senate and House were able earlier this year to get Congress to agree to have the MILC program added to the baseline federal budget. "I had anticipated early on that this might happen," Leahy said of the 2007 Farm Bill's troubles. "We were able to maintain MILC or it would have ended at the end of the fiscal year."

Under the present MILC formula, the program makes up 34 percent of the difference in the price paid for milk when the figure drops below a break-even level. Under the new Farm Bill, the percentage would rise to 45 percent and farmer eligibility guidelines would be expanded.

The funding for Lake Champlain clean-up would be directed toward reducing the phosphorus content of water leaching from farmland into rivers and streams that feed into Lake Champlain. 11-24-07