

Farm Bill Withers in the Absence of a Strongman
Senate Infighting Stalls Progress, Exposes Gap In Democrat Leadership
(Wall Street Journal)
By David Rogers

WASHINGTON -- A stalled farm-bill debate in Congress exposes a gap in the Democratic leadership: there is no single strongman to force deals upon three Senate committee chairmen who all want a hand in agriculture policy.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle played that role in the last big farm bill five years ago, and even Republicans, who helped bring down the South Dakota Democrat in 2004, now miss him. "When Daschle walked in, it was like Gen. Patton. Everything sort of came together," says Rep. Frank Lucas (R., Okla.). "There's no Gen. Patton this time."

- Stalled: Two months after House passage, a farm bill has stalled in the Senate.
- The Players: Three Democratic chairmen, Sen. Tom Harkin of Agriculture, Sen. Max Baucus of Finance and Sen. Kent Conrad of Budget, are all vying for a role.
- What's Next: Mr Harkin will try again in two weeks, but failure to produce a bill then will jeopardize any action this year.

There's no Senate farm bill either. Two months after the House passed its version, Senate Agriculture Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D., Iowa) was forced to again postpone action yesterday for lack of a consensus among Democrats.

Going into last night, the Senate Finance Committee approved a \$15 billion tax relief and disaster-aid package which its Chairman Max Baucus (D., Mont.) will meld with the larger farm bill. On a 13-8 vote, the panel approved language to codify rules narrowing corporate-tax shelters, but the added revenues would go more to finance a new disaster-trust fund -- important for drought-prone Montana -- than relieving the budget problems facing Mr. Harkin.

"I'm very insistent that this be paid for and it's hard to do," said Senate Budget Committee Chairman Kent Conrad (D., N.D.), the third major player in the farm debate. "People are not going to be able to get everything they'd like to have. This is just reality and we need to face up to it."

Together with Mr. Harkin, Messrs. Baucus and Conrad sit on the Senate's agriculture panel -- the forge where Democratic leaders are still hoping a deal can be hammered out.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D., Nev.), who served under Mr. Daschle but has little of his background in agriculture, will face pressure to intercede if the delays persist. Already his hands-off approach contrasts with that of House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D., Calif.), who steeped herself in the details of the House bill, brokering deals and directing tax writers to provide added revenue to keep her rural-urban coalition together.

Adopted in July, the five-year \$286 billion House bill extends major loan and price-support programs for producers, but also tightens subsidy payments and requires more program transparency. Fruit and vegetable growers are promised new assistance. Food-stamp benefits would be updated, and expanded nutrition aid provided for children in developing countries.

Key to the House bill was an infusion of revenue from offshore oil leases and a tax provision raising an estimated \$7.5 billion from foreign corporations with U.S. subsidiaries, such as Sony Corp. and Nissan Motors Co.

Ms. Pelosi prevailed with largely Democratic support. But the threshold to avert a filibuster is higher in the Senate, and Mr. Baucus appears reluctant to challenge the powerful multinationals that would be affected.

Mr. Baucus's tax package provides modest budget relief for Mr. Harkin by creating a new optional tax credit for farmers who put land in a conservation-reserve program. This could reduce government payments by several billion dollars, but that's the equivalent of about half the extra revenues the House had in the first five years, and the gap grows wider over time.

Mr. Harkin's problem then is he begins with less available money than the House. Rather than digging himself out of this hole, he has antagonized colleagues by insisting that the Senate add about \$1.4 billion more than the House for conservation and rural-development programs.

Mr. Conrad has walked him back from what appeared to be politically unrealistic cuts from commodity programs. But differences remain, and the Senate is historically an arena where populist Midwest demands for strict subsidy limits run into cotton and rice interests allied with Southern Democrats and Republicans.

With a new fiscal year under way, portions of the 2002 farm bill have already expired. But the real crunch will come in December and January when farmers begin to talk to bankers about their next crop year.

Mr. Harkin hopes to get his committee back together again in two weeks to produce a bill that can be moved quickly to the Senate floor. But supporters fear there will be growing pressure to simply reauthorize the current commodity programs, without any change, for another crop year.

Going into the 2008 elections, failure to produce a farm bill would be a setback for Ms. Pelosi's hopes of expanding Democratic gains in rural areas. And the chore of writing a bill doesn't get any easier with time.