

## **Bush Asks Congress Extend 2002 Farm Law For Year** (Reuters, DC)

U.S. President George W. Bush on Tuesday called on Congress to give up its deadlocked negotiations over a \$600 billion farm law and pass by Friday a one-year extension of the 2002 law, popular in farm country.

The White House proposal would erase hopes in Congress of large increases in funding for nutrition programs like food stamps and in land stewardship. Some farm lobbyists say a bill cannot pass without rewarding those popular programs.

House and Senate negotiators, meeting minutes after the White House issued Bush's statement, said they would make a final effort to wrap up the new law. The optimism was mixed with sober words that time is short.

"Maybe that's where we end up, I don't know," said Senate Agriculture Committee chairman Tom Harkin, referring to Bush's idea of a one-year extension. The Iowa Democrat oversees the effort to write a final version of the farm bill.

Farm bills are omnibus legislation that control dozens of programs including nutrition, stewardship, specialty crops and biofuels. Nutrition would get two-thirds of the estimated \$600 billion in outlays over the coming decade.

Discussions have deadlocked for weeks over how to pay for a \$10 billion spending increase for the new law and Senate insistence on a \$2.4 billion tax package. While traveling in Louisiana, Bush said in a statement there were no signs that negotiators would agree soon on a reform-minded farm law that does not raise taxes.

"I therefore call on Congress to provide our agricultural producers with the certainty to make sound business and planting decisions about this year's crop by extending current law for at least one year," said Bush.

A one-week extension of agricultural programs expires on Friday. White House spokesman Scott Stanzel said Bush does not support another short-term extension.

Farmers are in the midst of spring planting. Winter wheat, grown in the Plains states, will be harvested in late spring and could go to market without assurance federal supports.

Harkin and Virginia Rep. Bob Goodlatte, the Republican leader on the House Agriculture Committee, noted the House and Senate are in accord on an outline of the new law. One option, Goodlatte said, would be to fashion a bill around those items.

"A one-year extension is a bad idea and it is not an acceptable outcome," said House Agriculture chairman Collin Peterson, Minnesota Democrat.

Under the House-Senate framework, spending on nutrition would rise by \$9.5 billion, stewardship by \$4 billion, specialty crops by \$1.35 billion and biofuels by \$900 million.

The 2002 law boosted crop and dairy subsidy rates and increased stewardship funding by 80 percent. Antihunger groups say it is time to raise food stamp benefits, which average \$1 per meal.

Lawmakers would be certain to try to raid farm subsidies to pad nutrition and stewardship if an extension is proposed. The most likely target would be the \$5.2 billion guaranteed annually to grain, cotton and soybean farmers in so-called direct payments.

Also during their meeting, senators said it was the House's turn to present an offer to wrap up the farm law.