

\$400B approved for farmers, forests and poor

By JULIET LINDERMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After months of debate and negotiation, Congress voted final approval Wednesday to a massive farm bill that will provide more than \$400 billion for agriculture subsidies, conservation programs and food aid.

The House voted 369-47 for the legislation, which sets federal agricultural and food policy for five years, after the Senate approved it 87-13 on Tuesday. It is now headed to the desk of President Donald Trump, who is expected to sign it.

The measure reauthorizes crop insurance and conservation programs and pays for trade programs, bioenergy production and organic farming research. It also reduces the cost for struggling dairy producers to sign up for support programs and legalizes the cultivation of industrial hemp.

House Agriculture Committee Chairman Rep. Michael Conaway, R-Texas, said the final bill looks at “stresses and strains across all of rural America, economic development issues and just the practice of farming and ranching. It says: here are federal resources we want to put against those problems.”

One thing the bill doesn't include: tighter work requirements for food stamp recipients, a provision of the House bill that was celebrated by President Donald Trump but became a major sticking point during negotiations.

Another contentious piece of the House's original legislation, relaxing restrictions on pesticide use, also didn't make it into the final text.

Conaway championed the stricter work requirements, and fought to restrict the ability of states to issue waivers to exempt work-el-



AP Photo/J. Scott Applewhite

In this May 16, 2018, file photo, House Agriculture Committee Chairman Mike Conaway, R-Texas, speaks about the farm bill during a news conference on Capitol Hill in Washington.

igible people. The House measure also sought to limit circumstances under which families who qualify for other poverty programs can automatically be eligible for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and earmarked \$1 billion to expand work-training programs.

The bill does increase funding for employment and training programs from \$90 million to \$103 million.

The original House bill failed during its first floor vote when 30 GOP members blocked it over an unrelated immigration issue. It passed a second time around, but without any support from

Democrats, who insisted they wouldn't vote for a bill with the new work requirements included.

“The version we passed in June took bold steps to reforming SNAP and moving in the direction most of us believed was supported by the American people,” Conaway said. “That was not supported broadly by the body across the building, and we made the compromise necessary to get us to this place.”

The House and Senate also clashed over portions of the bill's forestry and conservation sections.

Negotiations were complicated in recent weeks when the White House asked Congress to make changes to the forestry section in response to deadly wildfires in California, giving more authority to the Agriculture and Interior departments to clear forests and other public lands. The final text doesn't significantly increase the

agencies' authority.

Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue said the bill will help producers “make decisions about the future, while also investing in important agricultural research and supporting trade programs to bolster export.” But he voiced disappointment over the failed changes to work requirements.

“While I feel there were missed opportunities in forest management and in improving work requirements for certain SNAP recipients, this bill does include several helpful provisions and we will continue to build upon these through our authorities,” he said.

The bill maintains current limits on farm subsidies, but includes a House provision to expand the definition of family to include first cousins, nieces and nephews, making them eligible for payments under the program.

Insurance claims at \$9 billion from California fires

By KATHLEEN
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Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Insurance claims from last month's California wildfires already are at \$9 billion and expected to increase, the state's insurance commissioner announced Wednesday.

About \$7 billion in claims are from the Camp Fire that destroyed the Northern California city of Paradise and killed at least 86 people, making it the deadliest U.S. wildfire in at least a century. The rest is from the Woolsey and Hill fires in Southern California.

Collectively, the fires destroyed or damaged more than 20,000 structures, with the vast majority in and around Paradise. On Tuesday, state and federal authorities estimated it will cost at least \$3 billion just to clear debris.

“As the claims get perfected, as individuals get access to their former homes and neighborhoods, as they

dialogue with their insurance companies and share more information about the scope of their loss, we expect these numbers to rise,” Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones said of the \$9 billion estimate.

There are more than 28,000 claims for residential personal property, nearly 2,000 from commercial property and 9,400 in auto and other claims for the fires.

That's well above the number of claims filed following a series of fires that tore through Northern California's wine country last year. Losses from those fires were initially pegged at \$3.3 billion but eventually grew to \$10 billion.

While the Camp Fire destroyed about double the number of structures as the 2017 fires, home values in Butte County are far lower than those in Sonoma County. That's part of the reason total claims may seem low compared to the 2017 figures, Jones said. Median home values in Sonoma County are more than double



AP Photo/Noah Berger, File

In this Nov. 8, 2018, file photo, a home burns as the Camp Fire rages through Paradise, Calif.

those in Butte.

Jones advised homeowners to be cautious of “fraudsters and scam artists” trying to take advantage of vulnerable communities.

He also said it's time for California to start rethinking how and if it builds in fire-prone areas. Ken Pimlott, outgoing director of the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, told The Associated Press this week the state should consider banning construc-

tion in vulnerable areas.

Jones said local governments may not be fully considering the long-term impacts of building in areas at high risk of fire, floods and rising sea levels.

“That's going to be a hard conversation. Everybody likes to build new, peo-

ple obviously want to rebuild their communities,” he said. “We're in a new era where these risks are so bad I think we've really got to take a look at how we're making these decisions.”

Authorities are still determining what caused the fire.

Pacific Gas & Electric told regulators that a high-voltage power line malfunctioned at the time and spot that investigators believe the fire started on Nov. 8.

The San Francisco-based utility told the California Public Utilities Commission on Tuesday that several miles away workers found a fallen power pole and equipment with bullet holes.

A number of fire victims have filed lawsuits alleging that PG&E's equipment started the fire that destroyed the town of Paradise and killed at least 86 people.

The cleanup costs for last

month's fires will far surpass the record expense of \$1.3 billion the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers spent on debris removal in Northern California in 2017.

California Office of Emergency Services Director Mark Ghilarducci said the state will manage cleanup contracts this time. Last year, hundreds of Northern California homeowners complained that contractors paid by the ton hauled away too much dirt and damaged unbroken driveways, sidewalks and pipes.

The state OES spent millions repairing that damage.

Ghilarducci said the state OES will hire auditors and monitors to watch over debris removal in hopes of cutting down on the number of over-eager contractors.

“We learned a great number of things,” last year, Ghilarducci said.



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