



May 11, 2022

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT

# Agricultural Policy and the Midterms

## PRO POINTS

- **The direction of key agricultural policies are at stake** in this fall's midterm elections — and they're shaping critical races around the country.
- **Democrats' eroding representation in rural areas** is at further risk as a slew of the party's members on the House and Senate Agriculture committees face tough races this fall.
- **Topics such as inflation, environmental regulations** and sky-high prices for fertilizer, fuel and other agricultural inputs are becoming issues in close races in rural districts and putting new pressure on vulnerable incumbent Democrats.
- **Control of the House and Senate will determine which party gets to steer the direction of the 2023 farm bill** — a massive legislative package that could total \$1 trillion in spending. Major partisan fights are forming over hot button issues like food assistance and farm subsidies.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

U.S. farm incomes are at their highest level in close to a decade, and rural communities are seeing an influx of federal spending under Democrats' Covid-19 relief efforts and the bipartisan infrastructure law. But inflation and the rising costs of producing and buying food are adding pressure to a group of vulnerable Democrats who've managed to maintain their hold on rural districts in recent years.

President Joe Biden recently asked Congress to approve \$500 million in new federal farm subsidies as part of his emergency funding request for Ukraine aid. The Agriculture Department claims that funding could help soften the blow of high fertilizer, fuel and other farm production costs, while boosting U.S. crop production to fill supply gaps left by Ukraine after Russia's invasion. Biden is under immense political pressure from farm-state lawmakers, Republicans and Democrats, to help alleviate some of that financial pressure ahead of the critical midterms, and a senior USDA official told POLITICO this is one way the administration can show its support.

A slew of Democrats on the House and Senate Agriculture committees face tough reelection races this fall, including Sen. Raphael Warnock (D- Ga.) and DCCC Chair Sean Maloney (N.Y.). Farm district Democrats are in short supply on the Hill, and further losses would not only cede their representation on the agriculture panels but lead to further deterioration of Democrats' representation in rural areas of the country.

Other vulnerable House Agriculture Democrats include: Abigail Spanberger (Va.), Jahana Hayes (Conn.), Tom O'Halleran (Ariz.), Angie Craig (Minn.), Josh Harder (Calif.), Kim Schrier (Wash.), Cindy Axne (Iowa) and Sanford Bishop (Ga.).

Meanwhile, Reps. Cheri Bustos and Bobby Rush of Illinois and Filemón Vela of Texas are retiring. In another blow to House Democrats, Rep. Antonio Delgado (D-N.Y.) was recently tapped to become New York's lieutenant governor, a move that narrows the party's majority even before the November midterms.



## Democratic shifts in the House Agriculture Committee

Nine House Agriculture Committee members **face tough races for their seats** in the 2022 midterm elections.



Rep. Abigail Spanberger VA-07  
Chairs Conservation and Forestry subcommittee



Rep. Jahana Hayes CT-05  
Chairs Nutrition, Oversight and Department Operations subcommittee



Rep. Sean Patrick Maloney NY-18



Rep. Tom O'Halleran AZ-01



Rep. Angie Craig MN-02



Rep. Josh Harder CA-10



Rep. Cindy Axne IA-03



Rep. Kim Schrier WA-08



Rep. Sanford Bishop GA-02

Three members have **retired or plan to retire.**



Rep. Filemon Vela TX-34  
(Retired March 31)



Rep. Bobby Rush IL-01  
(Plans to retire)



Rep. Cheri Bustos IL-17  
(Plans to retire)  
Chairs General Farm Commodities and Risk Management subcommittee



Rep. Antonio Delgado NY-19  
Chairs Commodity Exchanges, Energy and Credit subcommittee

One member **will leave for state government**, becoming lieutenant governor of New York.

Source: U.S. Congress

For now, Rep. Al Lawson (D-Fla.) says he will remain on the ballot this fall, after his district was carved up under new congressional maps drawn by GOP Gov. Ron DeSantis and passed by the state's Republican-majority Legislature.

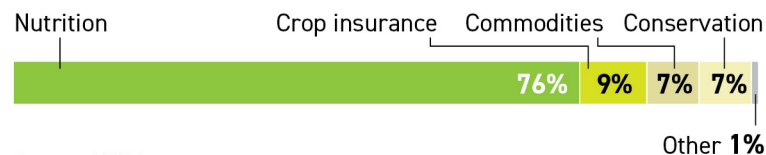


Nebraska Rep. Don Bacon might be the only Republican who could hold onto his blue-trending, Omaha-based seat, even as former President Donald Trump has been pushing for GOP primary challengers to Bacon following the congressman's vote for Biden's bipartisan infrastructure legislation last year.

**Farm bill implications:** If Republicans win a majority in the House, as they're favored to do, that would boost efforts by the Agriculture Committee's top Republican, G.T. Thompson of Pennsylvania, to rein in the Biden Agriculture Department's spending on climate efforts. Republican control of the House, and possibly the Senate, would also give the GOP more control over writing the upcoming farm bill. A Republican House majority could dramatically reform the bill's nutrition funding, particularly key food assistance programs — a perennial hot button issue. Any major changes, however, would still need to find a broader consensus in the Senate and survive a Democratic presidential veto threat.

## Majority of 2018 farm bill funding went to nutrition

Projected outlays of \$428 billion from the 2018 farm act over a five-year period, 2019-2023



Source: USDA

Republicans are using a series of farm bill hearings to turn up the political heat on vulnerable Democrats and the Biden administration, as debate within the House Agriculture Committee becomes increasingly bitter. Democrats on the committee are being forced to defend the Biden administration's policies against emboldened Republicans counting on flipping the chamber this fall.

Rep. Rick Allen (R-Ga.) told USDA's undersecretary for rural development last month that "this administration is going to destroy the country." Other Republicans questioned why Biden hasn't approved summertime sales of higher ethanol blends of gasoline with fuel prices soaring.

### WHAT'S NEXT

Biden and Cabinet officials including Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack are pushing a rural infrastructure tour to tout hundreds of millions of dollars from the bipartisan infrastructure law that are going to rural communities across the country, especially in tough districts.

The White House is betting that the investments help Democrats hang on in rural areas where the party has become increasingly unpopular due to its stances on cultural issues.



## POWER PLAYERS

- **Rep. David Scott** : He currently chairs the House Agriculture Committee and is helping shape early farm bill hearings. As POLITICO has reported, some Democrats on the Committee have privately voiced concerns about Scott's capacity to lead the committee through tense farm bill negotiations and many Democrats on the committee are likely to try to influence the talks from the subcommittee level, regardless of whether the party loses its majority in the House in the midterms this fall. The Blue Dog Democrat is also facing a group of challengers in Georgia's primary this month who argue Scott isn't progressive enough for his suburban Atlanta district.
- **Rep. G.T. Thompson**: The ranking member on the House Agriculture Committee is likely to take over the chairmanship if Republicans win a majority in the House in the midterm elections this fall. If so, he'll have substantial power over writing the House's version of the bill and how it goes to the floor for a full vote. Should he get the gavel, Thompson has vowed to step up oversight of USDA's efforts to significantly increase spending on climate programs.
- **Sen. Debbie Stabenow** : If Democrats maintain control of the Senate majority, the current Senate Agriculture Committee chairwoman will be the most powerful person on Capitol Hill when it comes to drafting and hammering out final negotiations over the upcoming farm bill. Stabenow (D-Mich.) is a veteran of numerous past farm bill legislative battles and is often described by former staffers and current lawmakers as "a force" when it comes to the massive legislation. She also holds the most institutional experience of the process among the four Senate panel leaders and is a member of Senate Democratic leadership. Even if she's in the minority, she will wield immense influence over the farm bill process.
- **Sen. John Boozman** : The Arkansas Republican is the ranking member on the Senate Agriculture Committee. If he defeats a field of pro-Trump primary challengers this month, Boozman will be poised to lead the panel in the event Republicans flip the Senate this fall — a distinct possibility. Like Thompson, Boozman is critical of USDA taking on a bigger role in fighting climate change and has told POLITICO he wants to step up oversight of USDA if he lands the chair role.