

[By Michelle Monroe](#)

Franklin County farmers are especially invested in the 2012 Farm Bill, as it was their work which helped to create programs intended to ease the three-year price cycle for milk

However, Republicans in the House of Representatives have steered clear of the new Farm Bill and also backed away from a recently proposed extension of the 2008 Farm Bill.

Instead they plan to bring a drought relief measure to the House floor before the start of Congress's August recess on Friday.

A lot of time and effort on the part of farmers went into forging the 2012 Farm Bill programs. Dairy farmers then lobbied the bill through the Senate and the House Agriculture Committee only to have the bill stall before the Speaker of the House, said Bill Rowell, a Highgate farmer.

"We have tools we believe will work to stabilize prices," said Highgate farmer Bill Rowell of the programs at stake.

Dairy economists have documented a cycle in which milk prices drop precipitously every three years before rising just as precipitously.

The 2009 drop resulted in prices, which were well below the cost of production.

To become law, the newly proposed drought relief bill would have to pass the Senate, which is scheduled to remain in session until early next week.

"For the first time, literally the first time in American history, a farm bill passed by the Agriculture Committee has not been brought to the House floor," Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt, said in a speech on the House floor on Wednesday. "Congress has a job to do for the American people and it's not doing it."

The new farm bill contains a program that insures not the price of the milk, but the margin between feed costs and the price of milk. There is also a supply stabilization program intended to encourage farmers to cut production when prices start to drop, rather than have farmers forced out of business by prices that have fallen below production costs.

Dairy economist Bob Wellington of Agri-Mark has identified small amounts of excess milk supply as the cause of dramatic drops in price.

However, House Speaker John Boehner apparently believed he did not have the votes to pass the bill. "It was more Republicans against Republicans, some that are overly conservative, some that are more moderate," said Rowell, himself a Republican.

Dairy farmers are currently struggling with declining milk prices and grain prices that have reached \$8 per bushel and are expected to climb to \$10 per bushel. Prices are being driven up by a drought impacting two-thirds of the country.

That drought is shrinking margins for all livestock producers, including beef and chicken, as well as dairy, according to Rowell, and is likely to drive up food prices.

"It is going to impact consumers and some of them are just hanging on now," said Rowell.

Also included in the Farm Bill are nutrition programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (S.N.A.P.), formerly known as food stamps, and school lunch programs.

The House Farm Bill includes extensive cuts to nutrition programs.

"I don't see how someone who is eating every day can take adopt the attitude, 'They should work,'" said Rowell, pointing out that many of the beneficiaries of the nutrition programs are children. Many are also elderly or disabled.

"These programs are important to farmers," said Rowell of the nutrition programs.

The farm bill is a massive piece of legislation authorizing almost the entirety of the programs overseen by the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture (USDA) including not only and agriculture programs but also the economic development loan grant and loan programs which are used by municipalities and non-profits throughout Vermont and conservation programs.

The 2012 Farm Bill has already been passed by the Senate and approved by the House Agriculture Committee. The House version is projected to save more than \$30 billion over 10 years.