

[By Erin Kelly](#)

The Vermont congressional delegation is pushing for a last-minute deal to pass a farm bill that protects dairy farmers from plunging milk prices, but they are running out of time as the 112th Congress draws to an end.

"We're going to do everything we can, but nobody can predict whether we'll succeed or not," said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt.

Congress is expected to adjourn sometime before Christmas, and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., said on the House floor Friday that he still does not believe there are enough votes to pass a new five-year farm bill despite its approval by the House Agriculture Committee. The Senate passed its own, bipartisan version of the bill in June.

"We've never had a farm bill expire without a new one to take its place," said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who serves on the Senate Agriculture Committee. "I think the House would be making a big mistake if they let it go without a vote."

The current federal subsidy for dairy farmers, the Milk Income Loss Contract (MILC) program, expired at the end of September. The farm bill would replace the subsidy with a voluntary federal insurance program that would protect farmers' incomes when milk prices plummet.

However, the more immediate danger is that milk prices for consumers could double. If no new farm bill is passed and the current law expires, dairy policy will revert to a 1949 law that tried to boost post-World War II dairy prices by mandating that the government aggressively buy up dairy products.

If that happens, dairy farmers fear they could lose consumers as families balk at paying so much more for milk, Leahy said.

"If the House doesn't do something soon, we're going to have the worst of all possible outcomes," Leahy said.

Rep. Peter Welch, D-Vt., who serves on the House Agriculture Committee, has been working with rural-state colleagues of both parties to try to convince the House Republican leadership to bring the farm bill to a vote. He said he and his allies have surveyed their colleagues and believe the bill could pass.

"It's been more than 140 days since the House Agriculture Committee passed the bill," Welch said. "It's ready to go. Members are ready to vote. The leadership has the authority to bring it up, and they need to use that authority."

Jenny Nelson, a Vermont dairy farmer who works as an aide to Sanders, said there are four things that could happen in the next few weeks:

- Congress could finally pass the new farm bill, which the delegation says would be the best thing for Vermont dairy farmers.
- Congress could pass a temporary extension of the existing farm bill programs that expire at the end of this year. However, that would not help Vermont dairy farmers because the MILC program expired at the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30 and would not be included in an extension. If Congress tries this approach, the Vermonters would offer amendments to try to tack MILC onto any farm bill extension.
- Congress could add the farm bill into whatever deal it may reach to avert the tax hikes and dramatic spending cuts often referred to as "the fiscal cliff." However, Welch said he thought it was unrealistic to think that the complex, 900-page farm bill could somehow be squeezed into a deal on the already complicated deficit issue.
- Congress could do nothing, which would result in dairy policy reverting to the 1949 law that

could double milk prices for American families and spark fears among farmers that they would lose customers they may never win back.

There were some hopeful signs this week.

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack met Thursday with the top Republicans and Democrats on both the House and Senate agriculture committees to try to help them come up with strategies to push the bill toward passage in the next few weeks.

After the meeting, Vilsack said he was optimistic.

"There is a commitment to work and try to get this resolved," Vilsack told reporters. "Rural America needs a five-year farm bill."