

This Week in DC --- December 4, 2023

The House takes up a bill aimed at boosting agriculture and energy research even as Congress lumbers toward the upcoming holiday break in a continued stalemate over aid for Ukraine and Israel, border security, and fiscal 2024 appropriations.

The DOE and USDA Interagency Research Act that the House will consider this week would authorize “cross-cutting and collaborative research and development activities” between USDA and the Energy Department.

The issues the departments are directed to address include the life-cycle analysis of agricultural and energy systems; “advanced crop science, crop protection, breeding, and biological pest control;” advanced biofuel development; and colocation of renewable power projects and carbon storage with agricultural production.

The bill doesn't provide any additional funding, but requires DOE and USDA to provide a report within two years on what their collaboration has accomplished and the “potential opportunities to expand the technical capabilities” of the departments.

The bipartisan legislation, co-sponsored by House Science, Space and Technology Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Okla., and ranking member Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., is being considered on the House suspension calendar, a fast-track process for relatively non-controversial bills. The measure needs a two-third majority to pass.

In a press release, Lucas said that leveraging DOE’s expertise and resources with USDA’s will ensure we are maximizing resources and federal research dollars, while overcoming challenges advancing production agriculture through transformative science and technology solutions.”

Also this week, the House Agriculture Committee will hold a “member day” hearing where individual lawmakers have a chance to air their concerns.

Meanwhile, congressional leaders continue debating a way forward on a supplemental aid package for Ukraine and Israel as well as trying to make progress on FY24 appropriations ahead of a rolling set of deadlines in January and February. Congress passed a continuing resolution in November that funds some departments, including USDA, until Jan. 19. Most departments and agencies are funded to Feb. 2.

Republicans are demanding that any new aid for Ukraine be accompanied by a series of border security measures, including provisions toughening asylum requirements. The issue is particularly challenging for new House Speaker Mike Johnson, whose slim majority is one vote thinner after the expulsion Friday of Rep. George Santos, R-La.

“For the U.S. House or Senate to move forward with” a supplemental aid bill “without having done our job to secure the border ... that would be not just a mistake but it should be dead on arrival,” House Freedom Caucus member Chip Roy, R-Texas, said at a news conference last week.

Hard-line conservatives in the Senate are trying to keep the heat on Majority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

“My priorities one, two and three are the border, border and the border,” said Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., at the news conference that included Roy and other Freedom Caucus members. “Unless there is meaningful reform that secures our border, we are hell no. We are not going to vote for cloture on any type of supplemental legislation unless it includes border security.”

Schumer quickly ruled out tying the border issue to the aid package. “We all know the border is a problem that we should deal with, but it's not related to Ukraine, or to Israel, or to the Indo-Pacific,” he said.

The hardliners have shown some flexibility on FY24 appropriations. Freedom Caucus Chairman Scott Perry, R-Pa., indicated his hardline colleagues would support funding the government at the limit set by last spring's debt-ceiling agreement, \$1.59 trillion, rather than the \$1.47 trillion limit they've been demanding for months.

At the same time, Perry insisted that any supplemental spending legislation be paid for with spending cuts.

While \$1.59 trillion “is too expensive for many of us, we realize that 1.47 is not going to happen,” Perry said. “But my goodness, the House overwhelmingly supported this \$1.59 and so did the Senate, and so the fact that just a few months later they're willing to just go beyond that like it doesn't exist is absurd.”