



Farming and ranching are important professions to the Seminole way of life in Florida and to Native communities around the country.

However, Indian Country has – some say for decades now – often been marginalized when it comes to discussions of the federal Farm Bill.

Stakeholders say the consequences are such that Native Americans and tribal governments are left out of the mix and can't effectively protect and advance agriculture-related interests.

The Farm Bill is one of the largest pieces of domestic legislation in the U.S. It is renewed by Congress every five years and covers areas like nutrition programs, agricultural policies, food production, natural resource conservation, rural development and insurance programs. Other provisions are on topics like commodities, trade, credit, research, forestry and horticulture.

The House and Senate prepare their own provisions of the bill to emerge with a final version which would eventually be sent to President Donald J. Trump for his signature.

The current bill expires on Sept. 30 and is now in the conferencing process.



The Farm Bill is one of the largest pieces of domestic legislation in the U.S. (Photo Beverly Bidney)

'Equal footing'

Jeanne Morin, the president of Public Policy Advisors, represents the Seminole Tribe of Florida in Washington, D.C., and lobbies on various issues important to the Tribe.

"Tribes have, for years, only been able to use the programs that the [U.S. Department of Agriculture] provides around the edges," Morin said. "Tribes often don't get included or aren't able to participate in programs or contract directly with the government."

So at the beginning of 2018, tribes and other Native entities got together to form the Native Farm Bill Coalition. The group has been working to get provisions in the reauthorization of the bill to be able to, among other things, allow tribes greater access to those federal government contracts.

... There are several provisions included in both versions of the bill that would be of historic importance to tribal governments and communities, Native producers, and all of Indian Country," the coalition said.

Morin said among tribes, including the Seminoles, is an interest in having better access to disaster and commodity insurance programs and better access to some of the funding sources available. For example, there is a beginning farmer and rancher program that provides loans to Native youth that is accessible through the Farm Bill.

There are parts of the Farm Bill that relate to environmental concerns as well, something tribes are also tuned into.

"Part of my job is to educate people in Congress to the fact that the Tribe is a government, and to the extent that the federal government gives access to any local government, that Tribal governments are on an equal footing," she said.

Morin said the final goal for Congress is to come up with a conference report that has provisions that both sides agree to before it's sent to the President.

Potential holdup

Any controversy with reauthorization of the bill might be in the details of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, provision. The food assistance program now has work requirements in the House version that previously didn't exist.

"That is really the big sticking point that needs to be resolved and how they resolve it will have some say on whether it's acceptable to the President when it gets to his desk," Morin said, alluding to the fact that the work requirement is something Trump is likely in favor of including.

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