

Adams on Agriculture
Interview with Mike Conaway
March 28, 2018

Note: This is an unofficial transcript of a discussion with Mike Adams and Rep. Mike Conaway (R., Tex.) from the *Adams on Agriculture (AOA)* radio program.

Adams: And welcome back. House Ag Democrats say a Republican farm bill would cut an estimated one million people from food stamps and could slash spending on food stamp benefits by more than \$20 billion over a decade. Here to talk about that and react to that is the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Chairman Mike Conaway from Texas. Mr. Chairman, thank you for joining us. We appreciate it.

Conaway: Well, thanks, Mike. Good to be on. Appreciate you having me on today.

Adams: Well, your plan's not even officially out, but yet we're hearing this criticism. We've heard about this impasse between Republicans and Democrats over this nutrition title. What's your reaction to this criticism?

Conaway: Well, I don't know what the criticism is, but the million people that you talk about come off the program either of two ways. Either they've gotten a job that is paying them more money than the 130% of poverty, where they're making their own money, taking care of their own families, or they decide for themselves that meeting these requirements to get the training or get a job is not worth working 20 hours a week on and they self-select and get off.

So those are the only two ways that people get off the program, is either decide for themselves they don't want to be on it—and this is America, you get to make that call—or, if you want to better yourself, you want to get off these programs, or you're working the 20 hours or more a week, then you stay on the program.

So I'm not sure what the 20 billion is. That's a number that's unfamiliar to me. You'll need to talk to the folks who made that up to find that. But we keep all of the money under the current baseline in the program. We didn't have to come up with any spending reductions. So whatever that ten year baseline is for the existing farm bill, that's what we live under. I keep all of the money in SNAP in SNAP, keep all the money that's in the other programs in those other programs. So I'm not sure where they're coming up with the 20 billion.

But this is an opportunity to reinvest monies back into job training, guaranteed slots, that if you're 18 to retirement age, that each state will have to provide you a training slot that would involve apprenticeships, training, [WIOA], subsidized employment, or you're working 20 hours a week then

you're still going to be on these programs. So that's the idea. If you're elderly, beyond retirement age, if you're pregnant, a caregiver of a child under six, or mentally or physically disabled, then of course none of these new things apply to you at all. You simply stay on the program under the existing circumstances.

The other thing we've done is that we've modernized the standards by which we measure. The asset test that has been in place since the early '70s—the last time that number was changed was 1977—we modernize that number by inflating it to current date.

We also allow for a savings account that doesn't count against the asset test. Every family ought to have a savings account that allows them to react to emergencies that come up during the month. We think that's good, sound fiscal policy for any family, but especially families on SNAP.

We also modernize the vehicle value that does not count against you under the asset test to make sure that you've got that car that's reliable enough to get you to and from work. So these are some of the things that are in the program. I'm not sure where the criticism's coming from. But I'm anxious to have the conversation.

Adams: Can you get a farm bill done this year with this kind of opposition to the nutrition title?

Conaway: Well, we'll see where the opposition comes from. We've had good conversations with the folks who are the most protective of SNAP programs, the NGOs and others out there, Catholic services and others that have had direct, keen interest in not cutting food stamps. The conversation we've had with them has been very positive. They're anxious to see the language, of course.

But I think once the American people see this, and once my Democrat colleagues see exactly what we're actually doing as opposed to what they've been told it's doing, which is, from what I can tell, is not exactly accurate, then I think they'll see the value of it and join us.

I need 218 votes. I don't care if they're Republican or Democrats. I need 218 votes. And I'm one of them, so I need 217. And I'm looking to find those to get this across the House floor.

I know my colleague Collin Peterson would rather just simply rely on the Senate bill. I'm not going to do that. That's not responsible. We need to stand up for American agriculture the proper way by getting this thing done. Folks who want to vote against it, vote against it, and they then get to look their constituents in the eye and tell them why the safety net is not important for production agriculture, why these improvements to SNAP are not important to the SNAP beneficiaries and to the taxpayers of the country.

So anxious to have the conversation. We'll get the language out as soon as we get the April 9th baseline official from CBO. We think we're good to go on that number, but we want to make sure that what we're doing fits in the parameters I've already discussed about no reductions to our spending. And if it does, then we'll get the language out and go to committee pretty quickly, and we'll see where everybody is.

Adams: If you do get it passed, given the differences between your version and what we're seeing and hearing out of the Senate, that would seem to set up a pretty tough negotiation to come up with something in conference.

Conaway: When has that never been the circumstance? Every farm bill out there has had an arm wrestling match in conference, and every bill we do. I mean, I get elected to the House of Representatives. I don't get elected to kowtow to the Senate. My colleague Pat Roberts is going to do a bill that he can get through the 60 votes over there, and then we go to conference. And just because that might be difficult, there's no reason to back up on what we ought to show the American people is the proper, good policy.

Now on our SNAP policy, three years of working on it, 21 hearings to find out what works, what doesn't work, where the moral hazard is associated with it. Not one time during that entire three years did I talk about cutting spending on SNAP. I never said a word about that. What I said was let's get the policy right. And that's what we think we've done.

I then said, well, we'll find out what the best policy is, we'll get that scored at the CBO to see if we can afford it, and if we can afford it, fine, we'll move forward. If we can't, then at least we know what the guideposts ought to look like and how we try to fit the bill under the numbers that we have available.

But we came up with this good policy that I think it's appropriate, and if we can afford it, it stays within the parameters I mentioned, and we're ready to move forward. So I think the American people are going to help with this regard, those who are on SNAP, those who, you know, in production agriculture who need the safety net associated with the non-SNAP titles will help us get this thing done.

Adams: I know you hope to get it done this year, you want to get it done this year. Do you think it'll get done this year?

Conaway: There's no reason for it not to. Tell me why it should not get done. We have hard decisions to make. I've got to reset some priorities within the non-SNAP title to come up with money for the vaccine bank for foot and mouth disease. We've got some other things going on. They're hard decisions we're going to have to come to resetting priorities. But we're not going to be any smarter in October or next year than we are right now, and so there's no

reason that we shouldn't get this done in time for the President to sign it before September 30th.

The folks who rely on these programs deserve the assurance of what the next five years look like. The drama associated with short-term [extension] [*brief silence*], [the expiration], and the threats of permanent law, all that drama is wasted effort, wasted energy. We're intelligent individuals. We know what we need to make decisions on. Let's make those decisions and then move forward. There's no reason to put it off.

Adams: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Appreciate your time.

Conaway: Good to be with you, Mike. Thank you, buddy.

Adams: Good luck. Chairman of the House Ag Committee, Mike Conaway, on *AOA*.

[*End of recording.*]