

Adams on Agriculture

Interview with House Ag Committee Chairman Mike Conaway

April 26, 2018

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

Adams: Welcome back. We're going to get an update on the farm bill with the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Mike Conaway, who joins us now. Mr. Chairman, we'll just call this segment *Conaway on Agriculture*, okay? If he can hear me. Can you hear me, Mr. Chairman?

Conaway: Yes, I can. I love that lead-in music. That's good stuff.

Adams: Yeah. We'll just let you have this. It'll be *Conaway on Agriculture* this segment, okay?

Conaway: All right, *Adams on Agriculture*, that'd be great.

Adams: All right.

Conaway: Talk in Morse code of some sort if the Russians are listening.

Adams: [*Laughs.*] So you got the bill out of committee. When is it going to go to the House floor?

Conaway: Well, as soon as I can get it there-- we'll come back...of course, everybody's back home working in their district next week. And I'm hopeful that...the popularity of work requirements is so strong, 70% among Democrats, 90% among Republicans, a blend of about 80. I'm hoping my folks have a chance to hear from their people back home on what's actually in the bill.

And then we'll get back that first week of May, start the whip process, and in all likelihood it'd be that following week that we would be there. But I don't think I can get the whip thing done and to the floor that first week we're back, so probably the second week.

Adams: Do you anticipate getting any Democratic votes? You couldn't in committee. Do you think you will on the floor?

Conaway: I'm certainly hopeful, Michael. There's no reason not to, when people actually understand what we've done. We had a good conversation yesterday with AARP, who came out against it right off the bat. They've

had second thoughts as they understood what we're actually doing and what they were misled. I'm hopeful that the more questions that get answered, the more opportunities we have to maybe show folks that hey, that's not in the bill. What we're being accused of is not in the bill.

The more of that that goes on, then my Democrat colleagues will say all right, we can...maybe we can work with this, maybe we can come back to the table, maybe we can suggest some changes or improvements to the program. And so, you know, I'm from West Texas, and I don't know if you've ever been out to West Texas, Michael, but we are eternally optimistic. And so that's just bred into me, and so I'm hopeful to get some Democrats when we go to the floor.

Adams: Are you expecting many amendments? We've heard Ranking Member Peterson say he's kind of downplaying amendments, saying he just doesn't think the bill's fixable even with amendments. So what are you expecting on the floor?

Conaway: I'm expecting that the Republicans will actively work to make the bill better. There may be some outliers who want to strip out some things out of the safety net portion of it. But we'll have a rule that allows those folks who will be a "yes" on final to suggest changes. If you're going to be a "no" on final, and it sounds like Mr. Peterson's already made his mind up, then he, you know, he's probably not getting an amendment through the rules just to make things worse, put a poison pill amendment in.

So I have no idea what to expect from those guys. As I said earlier, I'm expecting them to come back to the table. I'm expecting them to be a part of the solution. I'm hoping they're going to be a part of the solution. I think Peterson's got...recently been bragged on about being the most bipartisan member on the face of the earth. I'm hoping he burnishes those *bona fides* by coming back to the table and working on the farm bill, which is a way to prove that he's the most bipartisan member on the face of the earth. And so I'm hoping he comes back to the table.

Adams: We're talking with the Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Mike Conaway from Texas. All right, will you...how will this play out? You'll make sure you have the votes before it comes up for a vote? I mean, you're not going to take that chance of it going to the floor and not having enough votes? You will know ahead of time?

Conaway: Well, that's generally the conventional wisdom. We'll run our traps. Right now I've had good conversations with both sides of the Republican, you know, both ends of the spectrum of Republicans. I had good conversations with both of them. I've talked to the Main Street group. I've talked individually with the Freedom Caucus guys, many of them. I've gotten kind of a head nod from those guys that they don't see anything in there right

now that causes them to vote against it, so I'm thinking we've got the votes. But we want to make sure.

And, you know, leadership is always real cautious about bringing something to the floor that we don't pass because that's something you really don't want to do, especially HR2. The Speaker allowed us to use that number. It falls in right behind the tax reform, so it shows you how important it is to him and leadership, and so we obviously don't want to bring this to the floor and not pass it. But things are looking good right now. And we'll have all next week for people back home to be able to weigh in with their members, and then when we get back, we'll kind of see where everybody is.

Adams: Other than the nutrition title, the other aspects of it, whether it be ARC, PLC, or the conservation changes you're proposing, what kind of feedback are you getting on those portions of the farm bill?

Conaway: Really good. All of that was negotiated with Peterson and the Democrats on the committee. They gave us a letter of 50 things they wanted in the bill. Some of them overlapped with what we wanted. But we addressed every single one of them. Collin's fingerprints are all over the non-SNAP title, so that really was bipartisan work, and we're getting good marks across the board.

You know, a few folks out there that would do this different, do that different. People who like the CSP program, they thought we did away with it altogether. We pulled some of those conservation pieces out of CSP and put them into EQIP. But by and large, really good marks for the non-SNAP portion among the folks who are the most knowledgeable of the non-SNAP titles.

Adams: On the SNAP, what are you hearing from feeding organizations and those that are working with the people that need food and will be concerned about people moving off the food stamp rolls, what are you hearing from those organizations?

Conaway: Early on we were hearing the misinformation had an impact because they thought we were hurting seniors, they thought we were hurting children, and they thought we were hurting the disabled, and we're not. And so as groups, like I mentioned, AARP, we had a long conversation with them yesterday, and they came out of that meeting scratching their heads as to why they were so vehemently against the bill when they found out that we don't hurt seniors in our proposal.

And so it's a growing acceptance of the reality of what's actually in there versus the myth that was put out ahead of the markup last week. And so I'm anticipating that that will get better. Certainly groups like the Foundation for Government Accountability like it.

The Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, the CBPP guys, they are vehemently against it because we go after their cash cow. They are helping California and Illinois maintain statewide employment waivers that are unjustified. So they make a lot of money doing that, so I would expect them to be full-throated against my changes to the way that those communities are gathered up into blocks to try to squeeze an unemployment waiver out of the system.

So it just depends on what the perspective is. Again, we had a good conversation with Heritage about it. They certainly like what we're trying to do with SNAP. They've got their longstanding concerns about the non-SNAP portions, but on the SNAP piece they like what we're doing.

Adams: Now I know you write your bill separate from the Senate, but on the Senate side we're hearing that Chairman Roberts and Ranking Member Stabenow are pretty much in agreement in how they're going to move forward, and we're waiting to see what that bill is going to look like. But they're certainly not taking the same approach to SNAP as you are. How do you see this moving forward, if you get your bill passed, what that's going to mean when you get to conference committee?

Conaway: Well, conference is always a challenge between the two houses, and they have their perspective. Just like they're waiting on to see what I'm going to do, I'll wait to see what they've actually done. A lot of conversation around the table about what they might or might not do. Pat's a wily veteran of this experience, and so I'm going to wait until he actually gets a bill done to see what he does and doesn't do.

I'm confident he'll get a bill out and I'm confident that we'll go to conference on that. I'm also confident that neither bill will survive intact, neither our bill nor their bill. It will be a blend, as we normally do. And hopefully that blend is better than either individual product that's there. That's just the normal way we go at it.

But my job is to get the very best bill I can get out of the House. I'm partially there. I can get it across the House floor early May, and then we can have some more definitive answers to what you're talking about once Pat gets his bill done. And then we'll just quit speculating and we'll understand those differences between what we've done and what he's done, and we'll be in a better position to have a better and a more fulsome conversation, Michael, about it at that point in time.

Adams: Okay. Well, let me ask you to speculate one more time. Can you imagine or can you foresee a final bill not having some reform to SNAP?

Conaway: No.

Adams: All right, so some reform. We'll just wait to see how much and how significant those changes are.

Conaway: That's right. Michael, we've got stuff in there that's just good governance. The broad-based eligibility allows folks who make sixty to eighty thousand dollars a year to be on SNAP. Defend that. We've got folks who are having, who have SNAP, qualify for SNAP in two different states. We can't catch them now. Defend that.

There are lots of things that we're going to do that everybody agrees with. Who disagrees with allowing a SNAP family to accumulate \$2,000 of savings that doesn't count against their asset test? Who doesn't agree that having a \$12,000 car allows them to get to and from work better than a \$4,600 car?

I mean, there's lots of things that we're doing, Mike, but I got beat to death last week by people saying we love work requirements, we love work requirements. Well, okay. That's what we've got. It's 20 hours a week. We didn't increase that. Now, we increased that at the end of the bill to 25 hours a week, but not early on.

And so what I wish I'd have done last week was had a big chart of things that we'd done and make those guys tell me exactly which ones of those they disagreed with. They just categorically tossed the whole thing and they're hiding from having to answer those hard questions. And I wish, you know, and hindsight's always 20-20, but it would have been fun last week to actually take a straw poll: all right, who's against the \$2,000 savings account? Collin, are you against that? I mean, all those kind of things.

So yes, we're going to have some changes to SNAP, and it may not go as far as what we're going to, but I'm going to get this bill across the House floor because it is just good policy. We didn't come at this and try to cut spending. We didn't come at it wrongheaded. We came at it the right way, with the right heart. We're trying to help people get off these programs, get their lives back under their own control, and who's against that? Well, I guess Collin. So you tell me whether or not we'll have the opportunity to reform SNAP and whether it's the righteous thing to do.

Adams: Mr. Chairman, thank you very much for your time. Thanks for joining us on *Adams on Agriculture*, or should we say *Conaway on Agriculture*, a combination of the two. Really enjoyed it. We'll talk again after that vote in the House, okay?

Conaway: Well, Michael, thank you, buddy. I got real fired up there. But I don't know if you can tell, but I get a little juiced about this deal because it's just the right thing to do. We're going to work it really hard. And so speaking to you here from the nation's capital, *Conaway on Congress*, appreciate your air time.

Adams: Appreciate your passion. Thank you very much.

Conaway: *Conaway on Agriculture*, excuse me. [*Laughs.*]

Adams: [*Laughs.*] Take care, sir. Thank you. Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, Mike Conaway. All right, his thoughts on the farm bill. We'll see how it all plays out.

[*End of recording.*]