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Conaway full of farm bill optimism amid unsettled immigration question

By **ALEXANDER NIEVES** and **HELENA BOTTEMILLER EVICH** | 06/07/2018 01:45 PM EDT

The outlook for the House farm bill remains murky as high-stakes immigration talks continue on Capitol Hill, but House Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway's optimism has not waned.

The fate of the House bill has been tied to the contentious issue of immigration ever since the conservative House Freedom Caucus withheld votes for the measure in a bid to force a vote on a hard-line immigration bill. The farm bill ended up going down in a 198 to 213 vote nearly three weeks ago, with 30 Republicans voting against it, including conservatives and some moderates.

Conaway (R-Texas) was unusually upbeat coming out of a closed-door House Republican meeting on immigration Thursday, but whether the votes will be there for the farm bill come June 22 — or farther down the road — is still an open question.

"There seems to be a lot of consensus building towards the bill that they want to take up," Conaway said of the immigration talks, adding: "I'm coming out of the meeting encouraged that we'll get to legislation that will then free up the vote on the ag bill."

Conaway said he's "hopeful" that the GOP leaders have a list of "yes" votes that the House Freedom Caucus will deliver after the intraparty row over immigration works itself out.

However, Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows (R-N.C.) said Thursday that he doesn't think much has changed in terms of the farm bill's chances on the House floor. "We had a condition, and that condition has not been met," he said.

Meadows was reluctant to talk about the bill's chances of passage were it to come to a vote on June 22, as many expect it could. That's the deadline for the measure, H.R. 2 (115), to be voted on without changes, though a simple rule change could be made if a vote is not held by that time.

POLITICO asked the North Carolina Republican if the farm bill would pass if it were brought up again. "I haven't focused on it," he said. "It's a good question. But I haven't focused on it."

Conaway said he's looking forward to seeing the Senate Agriculture Committee's bill, which is expected to be released as soon as tonight. The committee announced this morning that a markup will be held next week.

"We're anxiously waiting the drop of that as well," the House Agriculture chairman said, adding that he has yet to discuss the contents of the bill with his Senate counterpart, Pat Roberts (R-Kan.).

Although Meadows seemed preoccupied with immigration discussions, he said he has no doubt that a farm bill in some form will clear the chamber by the Sept. 30 deadline.

"At the end of the day, we will have the farm bill before the current farm bill expires," he said. "I'm 100 percent confident on that."

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