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Bipartisan legislation introduced to adjust Agriculture Risk Coverage program



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A bipartisan effort to make adjustments to the Agriculture Risk Coverage - County (ARC-CO) program is making its way through Washington. Last week Senators Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND) and Joni Ernst (R-IA) introduced legislation intended to improve the accuracy of how ARC payments are calculated and distributed.

Enacted as part of the 2014 Farm Bill, the ARC-CO program was designed to protect farmers against revenue loss at the county level. The program sets a minimum guaranteed price for the covered commodity at 86 percent of the commodity's benchmark revenue and issues payments to farmers when the actual county crop revenue doesn't meet that minimum.

Payments are determined by two factors: The average marketing year price and the average county yield. However, discrepancies in payments between adjacent counties have been noted, and adjustments have been made to the program over the years.

In 2015, Senator Heitkamp pressed the USDA to change their policy regarding how payments are calculated based on location. Initially, the program paid farmers based on the location of the administrative farm, rather than the location of the physical crop. If a farmer's primary farm was set in a county that didn't trigger an ARC-CO payment, they wouldn't be eligible to receive a payment even if they grew a crop in a county



Senator Joni Ernst

that did trigger a payment.

"This fix will help farmers who produce in more than one county get the payments they deserve," said Heitkamp in a 2015 press release. "Whether you grow corn, wheat, or any other crop that helps feed the world, your Title I payments should be based on where you farmed, not just on the county used for administrative purposes."

While Heitkamp's 2015 adjustment allowed farmers to receive payments based on where their crops were located, the method of determining how payments are calculated for each county has remained under scrutiny.

In a 2016 letter written by Iowa Senators Ernst and Charles Grassley to then Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack, it was noted that payments to counties could widely vary from one to another. In 2014, Calhoun County crops received ARC-CO payments of \$23.21 per acre. Directly north in Pocahontas County, crops received payments of \$91.52 per acre. Other surrounding counties received between \$45 and \$75, leaving the Senators to question how payments are calculated.

"Farmers have raised concerns about the yield data being uti-



Senator Heidi Heitkamp

lized by USDA and the resulting distribution of payments to counties," wrote Grassley and Ernst. "We recognize counties are different sizes which can affect how well the crops in a county correlate to the county average yield. However, legitimate questions have been raised about the significant payment disparity that has occurred between adjacent counties in certain areas throughout the country."

Last week, Senators Heitkamp and Ernst introduced bipartisan legislation that directs the Farm Service Agency to use data from the Risk Management Agency in order to make more accurate calculations regarding yields, citing better county-level data than what is currently being used. The bill also gives local FSA state committees the discretion to adjust yield data estimates where there are inexplicable variations between counties.

"In Iowa, 97 percent of our farmers' corn acres and 98 per-

cent of their soybean acres are enrolled in the ARC-CO program. Unfortunately, some of our farmers have experienced payment discrepancies due to the program's reliance on administrative county lines, rather than a farm's actual physical location," said Ernst in a press release. "I am glad to join my colleague, Senator Heitkamp, in this bipartisan effort to address these disparities. Specifically, this legislation will work to ensure the data and process used by the Farm Service Agency to determine payments to our farmers are not unfairly affected by state or federal boundaries that have no bearing on a farm's yield. I will continue to use our farmers' feedback to address their concerns and provide them the support they need."

The bill also permanently fixes the rule, so that ARC-CO payments are calculated by where the crops are grown rather than where the farm is administered.

"We pushed very hard to get USDA to do the right thing and use the county in which the crops were grown," said Heitkamp. "They did the right thing, but we want to make sure going forward that the program is not dependent on where the farmstead is, but rather where the crops are grown."

The changes to the ARC-CO program will be introduced into the discussions for the upcoming Farm Bill, which Senator Ernst hopes will be ready by early next year.

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