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## AG POLICY AND THE FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ACT OF 1981

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One of the principal tasks of the 1981 Congress will be to write a new farm bill to replace the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 which expires in late 1981. The terms of the new act will point the direction for U.S. food and agricultural policy over the next four years.

The purpose of this newsletter is to explain the procedure by which major legislation becomes law, with particular emphasis on the respective roles played by the President, the executive branch, Congress, lobbyists, interest groups and individual citizens. Agriculture policy, like all national policies, is the end result of compromise between competing power groups and coalitions of power groups that will be affected by the outcome of prospective legislation.

The Senate and House Agriculture Committees each prepare separate bills for passage in their respective houses. To reduce the chances of a possible veto, the early preparation involves the committee chairmen seeking broad guidelines on Ag policy from the White House. In formulating these guidelines, the White House attempts to evaluate each policy alternative in relation to basic national goals (some of which conflict with one another). To do this, the White House staff confers with its own political advisors and federal agencies such as the Office of Management and Budget and the Departments of Agriculture and State.

Even if the House and Senate are controlled by the same political

party, their agriculture bills may differ because the House and Senate have different constituencies. All 100 Senators have some farmer constituents, while perhaps fewer than 100 of the 435 House members do. The Senate bill, therefore, is likely to be more concerned with farm income and conservation, and the House bill with food quality, food stamps and retail food prices. The Senate can also be expected to favor more liberal grain export policies and more restrictive dairy and meat import policies.

The initial drafts of the House and Senate bills take into account not only the policy guidelines from the White House, but also inputs from the Congressional Budget Office and the Department of Agriculture. Last year, for example, over fifty background study papers were prepared by the USDA for use by the congressional agricultural committees and others involved with policy formulation.

When first drafts of the House and Senate bills are completed, the committee chairmen assign portions of the bills to sub-committees for further study and public hearings. The sub-committees, after hearing testimony, make necessary revisions to the bills and submit the revised bills to the full Senate and House Agriculture Committees. In the so-called "mark-up" sessions that follow, special attention is given to eliminating conflicts that may have entered during the sub-committee reviews.

Before the House and Senate Agriculture bills can reach the floors for passage they must be put on the calendar. Calendar decisions are made by the Rules Committee of the House and the Majority Leader of the Senate.

Several possible roadblocks could delay or prevent the passage of the new act. If the House Rules Committee or the Senate Majority Leader dis-

approve of the provisions of their respective bills, for example, the bills might not be placed on the calendars for consideration. Further, once the House and Senate bills win passage, the two bills must be integrated into one before the proposed legislation can be sent to the President for signature (or veto). Members from both Houses are appointed to a conference committee to work out the necessary compromises. Stalemates can occur at this stage of the legislative process as well.

If a new Ag policy bill fails to win passage by the expiration date of the 1977 legislation, one of two things might happen. Congress might extend the 1977 Act or, if that should fail, farm programs would revert back to the basic legislation of the 1930's.

Where in this process do the general farm organizations, commodity groups and individual citizens fit?

Pressure groups, including farm organizations, are organized to influence the law-making process so as to win benefits for their members. Certain farm organizations with strong influence in the districts of key congressional committee members, particularly the chairmen and the Secretary of Agriculture, often have considerable influence on major legislative provisions. Farm organizations whose broad

goals differ from one another or which are unable to make necessary compromises sometimes negate each others' efforts. Ag commodity groups have tended to become increasingly successful in influencing legislation because of their narrower focus and their greater willingness to form coalitions across party lines.

Pressure groups make their points of view known through their lobbyists who interact with members of Congress and their staffs, testify before congressional committees, write letters and make phone calls. Individual citizens do not have to be part of a pressure group to exert influence on agricultural legislation. Letters offering constructive suggestions to congressional delegations and Ag Committee members can also be effective.

A totally new Food and Agricultural Act in 1981 is unlikely for several reasons. There does not appear to be widespread dissatisfaction with the present law and, even if there were, time will not permit proper hearings on all aspects of the legislation. However, some provisions might come under fire, such as the Food Stamp Program and target and loan prices. Thus in all probability, the 1981 Act will be a modification of the 1977 legislation.

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