

**AGRICULTURE: Groups appeal to Senate leaders for farm bill energy programs (12/13/2010)**

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Farm, conservation, energy and environmental groups and businesses are urging Congress to keep funding energy programs that will not automatically continue in the next farm bill cycle.

In a letter sent Friday to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), 33 groups stressed the need for supporting the eight energy provisions, which include the Biomass Crop Assistance Program and the Rural Energy for America Program.

Those programs are among 37 provisions in the 2008 farm bill that will not have baseline funding beyond 2012, when the five-year bill next comes up for reauthorization. Depending on how estimates are derived, the energy programs cost \$1.1 billion or \$1.9 billion, according to Congressional Research Service.

The only way for them to continue is through offsets elsewhere in the bill, which is likely to be difficult in an already-tight budget environment.

"These programs should be allowed to stand on their own performance and merits, but in order to do so they must receive funding to the maximum extent possible," reads the letter from the groups, which include the National Farmers Union, the Renewable Fuels Association and the American Forest Foundation.

"Support for renewable energy production from America's farms, ranches and forestlands has never been more critical as our country seeks greater economic security and energy independence," the letter continues.

Shifting funding now, the groups say, would hurt rural economies, erode confidence in Congress and threaten private investment in renewable energy sources.

Also Friday, the National Association of Conservation Districts sent a letter to the Senate Committee on Appropriations asking that it support full funding for 2008 farm bill conservation programs. There are five conservation provisions that will not receive baseline funding beyond 2012, including the Wetlands Reserve Program and the Grassland Reserve Program.