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House Ag Panel Members Look for Ways to be Heard on Climate Plan

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By Allison Winter

It is not clear what portions of the bill the Agriculture Committee will be allowed to weigh in on, and Waxman and other House leaders -- who have spent months in negotiation over the package -- presumably want to advance it with few changes. Peterson said yesterday that he is awaiting instruction from the House parliamentarian before he decides how his committee will handle the legislation.

But even if the Agriculture Committee's official jurisdiction is limited, the fiery chairman said he would consider going beyond his panel's reach to try to alter the legislation.

"Apparently there was a situation in the 1990s where some bill came over from the Banking Committee, and our committee at that time made all kinds of changes that weren't in our jurisdiction -- and some how or another got by with it," Peterson said. "So that could be a possibility."

The panel could also simply report the bill out of committee but recommend the full House reject the measure, Peterson said. But whatever path his panel takes, Peterson said he would not back down, despite the strong support for the measure from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.).

"I will try to work with the speaker, but in this case, if we don't get this fixed, I can't be persuaded," Peterson said.

Potential changes?

A major area of concern for many members of the Agriculture Committee is the legislation's requirements on biofuels. Farm state lawmakers have been lashing out against biofuels restrictions ever since the 2007 energy law put limits on what sources of biomass could qualify for incentives under the renewable fuels standard.

The climate bill would relax some of those restrictions, but Agriculture Committee members said the changes do not go far enough to meet some of their concerns.

"We're really concerned about the definitions ... which would really restrict the ability of some regions of the country to participate in second-generation ethanol production," Holden said.

Holden said the committee would like to include changes similar to those in an amendment on renewables that failed in the Energy and Commerce Committee earlier this week. The amendment (pdf) from Rep. Greg Walden (R-Ore.) would create a renewable biomass definition far more permissive than the underlying bill by allowing

materials from national forests to meet the renewable standard and also eases limits on materials from private lands.

Farm state lawmakers are also opposed to avenues for U.S. EPA to consider greenhouse gas emissions from "indirect" land-use changes spurred by biofuels production. The lawmakers say these measurements are based on unproven models that paint an unfair picture of corn ethanol's emissions. An amendment on indirect land use was rejected by the Energy and Commerce panel last night (see related story).

"Indirect land use is a big issue," Peterson said.

Other concerns are more broad. Peterson does not support Wall Street getting involved in carbon credit trading. And Republicans on his panel are opposed to any bill that might raise energy prices. The rural group, headed by Lucas, argues that the legislation's predicted higher energy prices would disproportionately affect farmers, who would face higher costs for feed and fertilizer if oil and gas prices rise.

Agriculture interests also want the legislation to include a bigger role for USDA and better opportunities for farmers to profit from changing their soil management practices and selling the resulting estimated emission cuts as a carbon credit.

Unlike a cap-and-trade bill the Senate debated last year, the Waxman-Markey plan does not specify that agricultural practices, such as idling former cropland, can count as offsets.

But despite all the concerns, farm groups say it is not impossible to get them on board with the legislation.

Richard Krause, director of congressional relations for the American Farm Bureau Federation, said major improvements could be made with the addition of just a few sentences in the bill. For instance, he said it should specify that agriculture is eligible for offsets and allow "early actors" who made conservation improvements on their farms several years ago to be involved.