

Senate signs off on specialty-crop farm bill

By Michael Doyle, Bee Washington Bureau
The Fresno Bee, Thursday, Jun. 21, 2012

WASHINGTON -- The Senate handily approved a farm bill Thursday.

Putting aside most partisan rancor, lawmakers approved the package on a 64 to 35 vote that camouflages some tough choices still ahead. The debate now ripens in the House, where lawmakers will write their own farm bill in mid-July.

In coming weeks, anticipating the future House and Senate negotiations, Californians will try to retain the farm bill provisions they like while fending off the ones they fear.

The Senate bill notably includes continued funding for specialty crop programs favored by the state's fruit-and-vegetable growers. These include the \$200 million-a-year Market Access Program, which this year is funding the likes of the California Asparagus Commission and the California Kiwifruit Commission. It includes a specialty crop research initiative and a targeted block grant program that now steers about \$18 million a year to California.

Since starting the farm bill debate June 7, senators also folded in some amendments sought by California growers.

One amendment by Democratic Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer orders a study of a new type of insurance coverage that might protect fruit and vegetable producers against lost sales due to a public safety scare. Another amendment added back \$37.5 million for an air quality program used to replace old diesel tractor engines in polluted regions.

"The Senate-passed farm bill makes significant investments in California's \$38 billion-a-year agricultural industry, most notably in pest and disease management, organic farming and important research programs," Feinstein said in a prepared statement.

In other areas, though, state farm leaders will try to revise the proposals.

The Senate bill eliminates milk price supports and replaces them with a voluntary insurance program tied to a supply management scheme designed to tamp down overproduction. When dairy prices fall, processors would cut payments to farmers and send the difference to the government; the idea, born in the Midwest, divides the dairy industry. "I'm very disappointed in the Senate version," David Ahlem, vice president of Hilmar Cheese Co., said Thursday.

The bill eliminates direct payments for commodities such as cotton, rice, wheat and corn, and replaces them with a new subsidized insurance program. California cotton producers received \$54 million in 2010 and \$198 million in 2009, according to data compiled by the Environmental Working Group.