In the next installment of our “Policy 101” series of articles, we’d like to tackle another particularly complex policy topic: the farm bill. The farm bill is the nickname for the acts passed approximately every five years by Congress that address agricultural and food policy through a variety of programs, including commodity support, nutrition assistance, and conservation (Fig. 1). The current farm bill, the Agricultural Act of 2014, was signed into law on 7 Feb. 2014 and will remain in effect through 2018.

There are 12 titles in the farm bill, which cover different topics. The two titles that matter most for agricultural science are “Title 2: Conservation” and “Title 7: Research, Extension, and Related Matters.” The Conservation Title covers programs that help farmers implement natural resource conservation efforts on working lands like pasture and cropland, land retirement programs, and easement programs. The Research Title provides some research funding for programs like specialty crops and organic research, but this mandatory money is a very small piece of USDA’s overall research budget, the rest of which is determined by the annual appropriations process. Other titles of note are Forestry, Energy, and Horticulture.

The main purpose of the farm bill with regard to agricultural research is to provide oversight and policy guidance for USDA programs like the National Institute for Food and Agriculture (NIFA), the intramural Agricultural Research Service (ARS), and the non-competitive “capacity” or “formula” funds dedicated to land grant universities. For example, the 2008 farm bill established the NIFA competitive grants program and the Agriculture and Food Research Initiative (AFRI), and the 2014 farm bill created the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR)—a new nonprofit to foster research innovations through public-private collaborations.

Developing the farm bill process, usually begins a year or two before current legislation expires. Members of Congress who serve on the Senate and House Committees on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry hold the primary responsibility of drafting the bill, but many outside groups including commodity, nutrition, and environmental NGOs contribute to it.

The process begins with congressional hearings where stakeholders can share their views and proposals with members of Congress. Based on these hearings, the House and Senate Agriculture Committees each draft, debate, “mark up” (amend and change), and eventually pass their respective bills. The two bills can differ widely at this point and will next have to be “conferenced,” where a small group from both the House and Senate work to combine the two separate bills into a final compromise package. This final bill is then voted on by both the House and Senate and, if approved, goes to the president for his signature.