The farm bill impacts every American who eats. Modern farm bills are five-year spending plans that combine risk management for farmers, nutrition and conservation programs, and funding for research and extension. The 2014 farm bill is set to expire in September of 2018, and lawmakers are already beginning to think about how to reach a bipartisan consensus for the next farm bill’s passage.

Modern farm bills are behemoths. The most recent, in 2014, authorized nearly $1 trillion in spending over 10 years. Commodity programs and crop insurance, the original purpose of the farm bill, represent a big, nearly $135 billion chunk of that, but the largest expense is the Nutrition Title. At $756 billion, Congress’s allocation for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as Food Stamps, by far dwarfs the $56 billion spent on conservation programs and the $8.2 billion that encompasses research, extension, energy, and horticulture, combined.

Despite the bipartisan nature of the agriculture committees, passing a farm bill has become a difficult task. To make matters more difficult, the House Budget Committee has directed the Agriculture Committee to find $10 billion in cuts compared with the already-low “baseline” of what was actually spent. (Because fewer people used SNAP than expected, the 2014 farm bill is costing $130 billion less than what was budgeted.) On the one hand, this is far better than the $70 billion in additional cuts that were originally proposed. However, it means that there is little to no room to advocate for increases in research and conservation programs. Any increase in funding for these programs would need to come from cuts elsewhere.

Survey to Help Societies Advocate for Priorities

The farm bill represents an important opportunity for stakeholders in the food and agriculture sector to weigh in on agricultural policies. Now is the time for ASA, CSSA, and SSSA members to organize our priorities, so we can effectively work with policymakers to impact research policy. In May, the Societies’ member-led Farm Bill Task Force distributed a survey on current farm bill programs. While new funding is not likely on the table, we in the Science Policy Office in Washington, DC can advocate for the programs and priorities that are important to membership.

- More than 260 members took the survey, shared memorable stories and helpful suggestions.
- Five major themes shone through:
  - More than 50% of respondents report research they cannot pursue due to equipment limitations, and 70% agreed there should be separate grants just for equipment.
  - 88% of respondents want grants that students and post-docs can apply to directly.