As we’ve outlined in previous articles, the farm bill is a large, multi-year law that governs an array of agricultural programs—including USDA research programs. The farm bill is an opportunity for the research community to work with legislators to propose policy changes that would improve and advance agriculture research. The ASA, CSSA, and SSSA Science Policy Office staff have spent the last several months meeting with members of both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees presenting our requests for the upcoming farm bill (see https://bit.ly/2K4WfVX for a summary of our farm bill priorities).

After more than a year of hearings, stakeholder meetings, and listening sessions, both the House and Senate have released their farm bills. The House unveiled its version, the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018, on 12 April, and the Senate released its bill, the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, a few months later on 8 June. So where does food, agriculture, and natural resources research fit in? While neither bill includes a commitment to double ag research funding—something ASA, CSSA, and SSSA had pushed for—both bills do include several of our research priorities and some new programs to address emerging issues and technology.

Both the House and Senate farm bills include a competitive research equipment grants program authorized at $5 million/year. Equipment grants were the number one request from our farm bill survey and were one of the Societies’ farm bill recommendations. Both bills also authorize a Genome to Phenome Initiative at $30 million/year. Both of these programs are authorized in the farm bill, which means that the bill creates the programs and recommends an amount at which they should be funded, but the farm bill does not actually provide any funding. Even if these programs are included in the final farm bill, they would still need to be funded through the annual appropriations process.

The farm bill does provide some mandatory funding—spending that happens automatically and does not require annual appropriations. Both the House and Senate bills increase mandatory funding for the Organic Agriculture Research and Extension Initiative. The Senate bill also establishes a new mandatory research initiative for Urban, Indoor, and other Emerging Agriculture Production Research, Education, and Extension at $4 million/year.

The Senate bill also creates a new advanced development authority (AgARDA) to address high-risk agricultural and food challenges. Finally, the Senate bill provides the Foundation for Food and Agriculture Research (FFAR) with an additional $200 million.

As you can see in Table 1, while there are some programs or changes that appear in both bills, there are differences within the research titles of each bill. Once the House and Senate vote to approve their respective bills, they will go to conference to work out the differences between the two bills. This compromise bill will then need a final vote of approval from both chambers before it can be signed into law.