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A Legislative History of Renewable Energy in Rural Agriculture

***Overview***

Agriculture has been a defining aspect of American life and political policy throughout United States history. It was an industry initially characterized by overexploitation and negligible regulation, but it was soon recognized that regulation would be necessary to ensure the endurance of American farming. More recently, with the threat of global warming, renewable energy initiatives have entered the legislative docket. Representative Roscoe Bartlett is currently sponsoring a bill that pushes for Federal research and development of farms that produce both food and energy. In considering this bill, we must look at the legislative history of American agriculture with respect to renewable energy.

In 1990, Congress was focused on commodity programs, organic food standards, and only briefly mentioned renewable energy research. In 1996, the adoption of the first Farm Bill made no reference to renewable energy or even energy in general, and it wasn’t until 2002, when an amended Farm Bill was passed, that Energy received its own title. The most recent Farm Bill, adopted in 2008, extended funding and development programs for rural energy initiatives. H.R. 90 intends to progress beyond funded research, and move towards the establishment of farms that produce both food and energy.

***101st Congress***

*Food, Agriculture, Conservation and Trade (FACT) Act of 1990*

This bill set a basis of agricultural and food programs to by administered under the Secretary of Agriculture from 1991 to 1995, and acted as a foundation for the first farm bill, which would be enacted in 1996. It outlined provisions for commodity programs including subsidies for small-scale farmers, as well as provisions for consolidating USDA efforts for rural development, and global climate change. This legislation is important because initiated funding for research into renewable resources and biomass energy demonstration projects in the context of agriculture.

***104th Congress***

*1996 Farm Bill: Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act*

This act was a turning point in United States agriculture because it laid a strong foundation of government subsidies for farmers, which were completely removed from actual prices. It established the Fund for Rural America (FRA), which provided grants to support rural development. It also established the Nation Agriculture Research, Extension, Education, and Economics Advisory Board to advise USDA on national research priorities and policies. A step back from the FACT act, however, there is absolutely no mention of renewable energy or energy in general. So while it established a precedence of funding for rural agriculture development, it does not extend financial support of renewable energy research in the context of agriculture.

***107th Congress***

*2002 Farm Bill: Farm Security and Rural Investment Act*

This act continued rural development initiatives from the previous farm bill and extended research of organic agriculture technologies for safe and productive farming practices. It also included Title IX: Energy, which authorized a competitive grant program (Energy Audit and Renewable Energy Development Program) for administration of energy audits and renewable energy development assessments for farmers, ranchers, and rural small businesses. It also authorized the Renewable Energy Systems and Energy Efficiency Improvements Program to provide loans and grants to assist eligible farmers, ranchers, and rural small businesses in purchasing renewable energy systems and making energy efficiency improvements. It provides mandatory funding of $23 million annually through 2007. This was the first time that funds for renewable energy were included in congressional legislation.

***110th Congress***

*2008 Farm Bill: Food Conservation and Energy Act*

The most recent farm bill extended funding for rural development, research and energy. It established the Rural Energy for America Program, which was an umbrella program to combine previous establishments. It extended the funding enacted by the previous renewable energy programs through 2012 for $225 million in funding for 2009-2012. This bill also established the Rural Energy Self-Sufficiency Initiative, which provides grants to conduct energy assessments, formulate plans to reduce energy use from conventional sources, and install integrated renewable energy systems. Funding was set at $5 million annualy for 2009-2012.

***Conclusion***

By looking at the history of the farm bills, we can see how funding of rural development and agriculture has expanded into funding of renewable energy projects. It is evident that as the issue of climate change has come to the forefront of the political stage, initiatives for sustainable agriculture and energy use have become a priority. While programs for funding are established by law, it is difficult to successfully carry out large renewable energy projects on already existing rural farms. While funding might be provided, a small farmer’s incentives to alter his practices are low. H.R. 90, the bill in question, hopes to provide funding not only for research, but also for the *development* of farms that produce both food and energy, thus making an even larger shift towards sustainable agriculture.

***Sources***

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