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Oct. 18 — With the end of the government shutdown, farmers and advocates for those who rely on federal food assistance programs are pushing for a new farm bill to win approval from Congress. The day after the government reopened this week, President Barack Obama called a new farm bill his third legislative priority, after a budget deal and immigration reform.

The long-delayed farm bill pays for farm programs and food nutrition programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, generally called food stamps. But like most issues these days, the farm bill has become part of a contentious political battle between Republicans in the House and Democrats in the Senate.

The biggest differences and the biggest point of contention between the House and Senate versions of the \$500 billion, five-year farm bill center around the proposed cuts to the food stamp program. The Senate bill calls for \$4 billion in cuts to the food stamp program over 10 years, while the House bill calls for \$40 billion in reductions over 10 years. A conference committee has been appointed to try to come up with a compromise farm bill. But Obama has said he will veto a bill with large cuts to the food stamp program.

A near record 47.8 million people receive food stamps, according to latest estimates.

In Wisconsin, more than 860,000, including children, senior citizens, blind and disabled adults, rely on food stamps, according to Sherrie Tussler, executive director of the Hunger Task Force. In Milwaukee County that number is 289,000, she said.

Earlier this week, the Midwest coalition of anti-hunger advocates met at the Hunger

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U.S. Rep. Reid Ribble, a Republican who serves the Green Bay and Appleton areas, is on the House Agriculture Committee and said he favors the \$40 billion in cuts to the program. A \$4 billion cut in the Senate bill will basically mean no reduction in the program, he said Friday in a phone interview from his Appleton office.

“When you consider SNAP has grown at extraordinary rates, the Senate does little to restrain (it) and there's no reforms in the bill,” he said.

The House bill provides some savings by restoring the work provision for single adults that was suspended during the recession. The House bill also would prevent states from expanding provisions that allow people who qualify for one program, such as home heating assistance, to be automatically allowed to get food stamps, he said. In short, the \$40 billion in cuts would restore the food stamp program to 2011 levels when poverty was higher nationally, he said.

“No one in Congress, Republican or Democrat, wants a single child to go hungry, but we recognize that the program can be scammed and that there's fraud in the program,” he said.

Ribble said he believes that the conference committee will reach a compromise and that a farm bill will pass. U.S. Rep. Ron Kind, a Democrat from LaCrosse, strongly opposes the House cuts to food stamps. More people are on food stamps because of the recession, he said. The House plan would kick some people off who are having a tough time, Kind said.

The Senate bill provides some savings by preventing fraud and abuse without affecting low-income children and vulnerable seniors, he said.

“I visit food banks all the time and hunger is on the rise and more are in need of food security, and the House bill will only make the program worse,” he said.

Instead of going after nutritional programs, he said, he would like to see reforms in

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Dunn County beef and grain farmer James Holte, president of the Wisconsin Farm Bureau, said he's optimistic that the conference committee that's been appointed will succeed in passing a bill that serves the needs of farmers and the food needs of the country.

As a farm organization, he said, the bureau doesn't take a position on the issue of cuts to the food stamp program. But Von Ruden said for every \$1 spent on food stamps, 15 cents comes back to farmers through the sales of products to general markets.

A \$40 billion cut over 10 years would mean about \$6 billion that wouldn't be going to rural America, he said. In Wisconsin, an estimated 77,000 farms make up a \$59 billion business, according to state agricultural statistics.

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