

Johnson's brewing SNAP crisis

The new speaker is a proponent of more hardline GOP efforts to overhaul the country's largest anti-hunger program.

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Mike Johnson's new role as House speaker heightens the chances of a major political clash next year over one of the nation's largest welfare programs and the government's preeminent aid package for farmers and rural America.

The fallout is likely to reverberate in countless congressional races, not to mention President [Joe Biden's attempts to win back rural voters](#) in the 2024 presidential race.

Johnson, more so than previous Speaker Kevin McCarthy, is a proponent of more hardline GOP efforts to overhaul the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the country's largest anti-hunger program that serves 41 million low-income Americans. As a senior member of the conservative-leaning Republican Study Committee, Johnson backed proposals to roll back food aid expansions under Biden and block states from exempting some work requirements for SNAP, formerly known as food stamps. In 2018, Johnson referred to SNAP as "our nation's most broken and bloated welfare program."

Now, the RSC, Freedom Caucus hardliners and other Republicans are pressing to include similar measures in the next farm bill. Such a move would upend the fragile bipartisan coalition needed to pass the legislation — a blow to House Republicans who represent the majority of rural and farm districts, including Johnson, as well as more centrist GOP members who will be fighting for their political lives in 2024.

However, time is running out before a year-end cliff for the farm bill. The massive package funds programs for the agriculture industry, food aid and rural America.

Rep. Dusty Johnson has authored one of the leading GOP bills to enact stricter SNAP work requirements. But the South Dakota Republican is urging lawmakers to pass a farm bill extension in the coming weeks, along with a new farm bill reauthorization as soon as possible.

"Failure to do that would hurt farm country and reflect poorly on Congress," Johnson said.

As POLITICO first reported, dozens of farm-state lawmakers have been pressing the new speaker to add an extension of the current 2018 farm bill to any stop-gap government funding measure ahead of another looming federal shutdown Nov. 18. Johnson hasn't objected to that move, according to three GOP lawmakers who've spoken with him and were granted anonymity to discuss internal conversations. As for

passing a new farm bill, Johnson has told lawmakers he wants to put the House version of the package on the floor next month, an ambitious timeline amid the government funding battle.

However, if Congress pursues a shorter funding patch, it would likely push any House floor consideration of a new farm bill into 2024, according to the three GOP lawmakers. That would put the must-pass legislation — a major lift even during normal times — squarely in the crosshairs of the presidential election cycle.

Many Democrats are alarmed that Johnson's rise to speaker will embolden GOP hardliners who are eager to target nutrition spending in the farm bill.

Already, Johnson's conservative allies are leaning on him to maintain his past support for significant spending cuts and new restrictions on SNAP in the next farm bill, arguing the moves are popular with middle-class voters. The farm bill's price tag is expected to top \$1 trillion for the first time and is already [meeting resistance](#) among dozens of wary GOP lawmakers.

Rep. Kevin Hern (R-Okla.), who heads the Republicans Study Committee, has said his group is still pursuing new SNAP work requirements and other changes in the farm bill — even after Republicans secured new SNAP restrictions in the debt deal earlier this year.

“I can't imagine the Mike Johnson that we know would pass up the opportunity to secure as many conservative wins as possible in this farm bill,” said one GOP aide, who was granted anonymity to discuss private conversations. “And that means serious SNAP reforms.”

Democrats, whose votes House Republicans will likely need to get a farm bill across the finish line, vehemently dispute those GOP arguments over SNAP and work requirements.

Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Mass.) said Johnson was “100 percent wrong on SNAP,” which McGovern described as “one of the most impactful tools we have to fight poverty.”

“Anyone who thinks the solution is more cuts is living in an alternate reality,” McGovern said.

While Johnson is a novice to major leadership struggles, he did gain brief experience navigating the politically sensitive topic of nutrition assistance within the disparate GOP ranks earlier this year.

Senior Republicans dispatched Johnson, vice chair of the House GOP conference at the time, and other colleagues to smooth over [tensions that flared up among hardliners](#) during the final debt deal negotiations with the White House, after the Congressional Budget Office projected the final agreement would actually increase federal spending on SNAP and participation.

Johnson touted the legislation's "landmark achievements" on a later call with reporters about the bill's new SNAP work requirements. He said those new rules "would not have passed through a Chuck Schumer-controlled Senate on their own." Johnson also noted the SNAP changes only affected older low-income Americans without dependents and were "common sense and publicly popular and cost-cutting."

"So we're going to return these programs to being a life vest and not a lifestyle, a hand up and not a handout," Johnson said on the call, adding that Republicans were "proud of these reforms."

Johnson, who is still assembling his team, has yet to dive into detailed planning for the next farm bill, according to the three GOP lawmakers who've recently spoken with the new speaker.

One GOP senator said Johnson told them Wednesday that his priority for must-pass legislation is seeing what can pass the House first and then worrying about final passage and negotiating with the Democratic-majority Senate later.

But pushing steep spending cuts and new restrictions on food aid would [squeeze some of the most vulnerable House GOP lawmakers](#), including a handful of New York Republicans who represent districts Biden won in 2020 and face tough reelection battles next year. After the bruising debt limit battle earlier this year, many at-risk members are not eager to rehash the same arguments over slashing food aid for low-income people, a politically toxic proposal in many of their districts.

"We've negotiated a new level of requirements on SNAP, and I think it's time to move forward from there," Rep. John Duarte (R-Calif.) said in an interview this summer, following passage of the debt deal.

Several major U.S. agriculture groups and some Republican lawmakers have also warned that drastic moves to pare back nutrition assistance would jeopardize passage of the next farm bill, entirely.

House Agriculture Chair G.T. Thompson (R-Pa.), who is leading the effort to draft the House version of the bill, has made clear that he doesn't want to pursue new work requirements or significant spending cuts across SNAP that would trigger major opposition from Democrats.

House Republicans are essentially guaranteed to need Democratic votes to pass the next farm bill, given the GOP's narrow majority and opposition within the House GOP over the topline spending. Even some House Republicans, like Dusty Johnson, say the task ahead is significant, given there are "a number of hardliners who struggle to get to 'yes' on anything."

"At the same time," Johnson added, "You've got some pragmatic farm-state members who get frustrated with the political gamesmanship."