CELINA - The next five-year federal farm bill likely won't be approved by Congress until late this year or early next year, said an Ohio State University official at Thursday's Mercer County ag luncheon in Celina.

The Agricultural Act of 2014, more commonly known as the farm bill, expires Aug. 31, said Ben Brown, manager of the Ohio Farm Management Program at OSU's College of Food, Agriculture and Environmental Sciences. Current programs funded through the roughly $489 billion farm bill will extend through 2018.

"No farm bill has hit the committee floor yet," Brown said. "Congress is trying to reform immigration and they will need to continue funding the government, so until then, I think the farm bill will take a back seat."

Brown said there isn't an urgent push to get a farm bill completed this time around because of fewer contentious issues.

"Corn and soybean producers seem pretty happy this time around with their programs, so people don't care as much," he said. "There is nothing driving it like last time with the push against direct payments."

Direct payments were subsidies previously paid to farmers regardless of whether they grew a crop. The current farm bill scrapped direct payments and ramped up the federal crop insurance program. Added to the current farm bill were Agriculture Risk Coverage and Price Loss Coverage subsidy programs. ARC payments are based on a farm's revenue, which is calculated from market prices and yields. PLC payments are based only on crop market prices. The programs -administered by county Farm Service Agency offices - provide payments to farmers in tough times. Crop insurance is designed to cover more serious losses.

Brown predicts funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program and the federal crop insurance program will stay the same in the next farm bill. He noted that expenditures for both programs have come down due to the improved economy and overall better weather for growing crops.

SNAP provides financial support for more than 21 million U.S. households aimed at preventing hunger and poverty among children, seniors and people with disabilities. A few weeks ago the Trump administration floated the idea of pre-assembled boxes of shelf-stable food to replace a portion of SNAP benefits. The measure was tucked inside a larger plan to cut SNAP by roughly 30 percent or $213 billion over the next 10 years, according to the Associated Press.

The federal crop insurance program provides U.S. farmers and agricultural entities with protection during times of drought and other adverse crop issues.

Brown said he believes the next farm bill will bump up funding for the popular Conservation Reserve Program.

The current farm bill caps CRP acres nationwide at 24 million. The highest number of CRP acres ever in the farm bill was 40 million nationwide in 1986, Brown said.

"Twenty four million acres is the lowest it's ever been," Brown said. "I think we could get back up to 30 million."
CRP pays landowners to take farmland out of production and plant grasses and wildflowers for quail, pollinators and other wildlife; plant trees, grass-covered filter strips and grass waterways; and install wetlands. All the measures are meant to reduce soil erosion and improve water quality. Contracts last 10 to 15 years.

Brown said whoever the major players are when a farm bill is created have a bearing on the final product. Many of the players involved this time are from the south, which means the bill likely will include some perks for commodities grown in southern states. USDA Agriculture Secretary Sonny Purdue grew up on a farm in Georgia, American Farm Bureau President Zippy Duvall is from Georgia and House Ag Committee member Republican Mike Conway is from Texas, Brown noted.

"That's usually the ways it is," he said.

Also during Thursday's luncheon, Sharon Harris, Farm Business Analysis technician, spoke about OSU's Farm Business Analysis Program.

"This is a new program in your area and we are trying to promote it," Harris said. "They use your numbers and run an analysis and hope you can improve your operation using the analysis results."

Harris said all information provided by participants is kept confidential. She called the program a good tool to help producers make changes to their operations if necessary. The analysis costs $100 per farm and some financial lenders are covering or sharing the cost with producers who participate. Interested persons can go to farmprofitability.osu.edu for more information.

The next ag breakfast meeting is 7:30 a.m. on April 5 at the Mercer County Central Services Building in Celina. Officials from MVP Dairy will give an update on the progress of the 4,500-head dairy under development northwest of Neptune.