

WASHINGTON - It's right there for the taking: billions of dollars in federal drought relief for parched farmers and ranchers.

All you must do is agree to pull troops out of by September 2008 or sooner, and to fund a slew of other people's pet projects.

That's the deal being offered Nebraska congressmen this week.

A House vote is possible today on a \$124 billion war funding bill that includes a timetable for withdrawing combat troops from .

Democrats have loaded the measure with funding for all manner of unrelated projects, including money for peanut storage, in an effort to pressure various lawmakers into supporting it.

The addition of \$3.7 billion in drought relief makes it a thorny dilemma for first-term Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., who represents drought-stricken areas of Nebraska 's heavily agricultural 3rd Congressional District.

"It's a struggle," Smith acknowledged Wednesday. "There's no way around that."

Drought relief is important, but Smith said he couldn't support attempts by Congress to micromanage the war.

He also criticized shoveling such items as peanut storage into "emergency" legislation, calling that fiscally irresponsible.

Five-term veteran Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said the hardball tactic of seeking votes with special spending items is nothing new.

He plan to vote against the bill. He cited the unrelated spending but said the most troubling part was the troop withdrawl requirements.

Terry already has explained the situation to Nebraska cattlemen.

"They said, 'Hey, we understand and we're as upset as you are that they're tying all this other stuff in,'" Terry said.

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb. said he plans to vote against the war funding bill because it has become a "picnic basket" of unrelated matters.

"There's no question that some farmers and ranchers have really suffered because of the multiyear drought," he said.

"Putting in unrelated legislation is a strategic, political move by the Democratic leadership to make it more difficult for some members to vote against it, but there's a principle here."

Fortenberry, too, rejects the notion of a fixed timetable for withdrawal, saying, "Getting to the level where we are setting artificial and arbitrary timelines really could tie the hands of the people in the field and lead to some very poor outcomes."

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, said he is not the least bit tempted by the drought relief money. He said the bill represents an attempt to micromanage the war from Capitol Hill.

War funding legislation also is pending in the Senate. It's unclear what the final version of that bill will look like, but a draft released Wednesday did include more than \$4 billion for agricultural disaster assistance.

Sen. Ben Nelson, D-Neb., a member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, supports adding drought relief to the measure. He questioned why it would be considered inappropriate to include such funds.

"Why does it have to be limited to one topic?" he asked. "That (drought) is an emergency that has continued to be unaddressed for years now."

Those years of drought have taken a toll on livestock producers in Nebraska. Dry conditions have affected availability of feed for cattle and have prompted many producers to reduce the size of their herds, said Melody Benjamin of Nebraska Cattlemen.

That group supports drought relief but has stopped short of urging a vote for the funding bill. Benjamin sympathized with the position of Nebraska's congressmen.

"It does put them in a terrible spot, but that's politics," she said.

