



The Daily Dish

The September Fiscal Traffic Jam

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When Congress returns from its August recess, it faces the backlog of must-pass legislation that's become the norm this time of year. What's new, however, is the extremely narrow window to act: Because Labor Day is so late this year, only three weeks will remain before representatives and senators flee DC for the midterm campaign trail.

First on Congress' to-do list is keeping the government open. The Dish [has already covered](#) the failure to do basic appropriations work and the posturing that may yet lead to a completely unnecessary shutdown.

But government funding is only the first of several fiscal deadlines awaiting lawmakers.

The latest extension of the Farm Bill – which governs food assistance, farm price supports, conservation, crop insurance, and more – also expires on September 30. The House and Senate are working on different versions of a reauthorization, but if they run out of time expect another extension that preserves the status quo and punts decisions about agricultural policy down the road. (After all, that's what Congress has done each year since the most recent bill expired in 2023.)

Surface transportation presents a similar challenge. The authorization for federal highway and transit programs also expires on September 30. Congress must enact a multi-year reauthorization bill or adopt another short-term extension. As with the Farm Bill, repeated extensions avoid immediate disruption – at the cost of smart oversight, program updates, and long-term policy certainty.

Taken individually, each of these deadlines is manageable. Taken together, they create a September bottleneck even worse than we've come to expect. Committee work takes time and a scant few legislative days remain; leadership must decide how much floor time each issue receives, and every day devoted to one deadline is a day unavailable for another.

It often seems that Congress won't act on regular business except when it's up against a deadline. But when the only response to a deadline is to put the entire federal government on autopilot, what's the point? Continuing resolutions delay appropriations decisions. Farm Bill extensions continue programs that we know may be outdated, wasteful, or unfair. Extending transportation programs leaves broader questions about infrastructure priorities or long-term Highway Trust Fund financing unresolved.

Stopgap measures aren't costless. While they may avoid immediate disruptions, they also reduce certainty for federal agencies, state governments, farmers, transportation planners, and the private sector. Temporary governance appears to be the default governing model.

The question facing Congress after Labor Day, then, is not simply whether it can avoid a government shutdown. It is whether lawmakers can break the cycle of governing by deadline or whether September will once again end with a package of temporary extensions that pushes today's decisions onto tomorrow's calendar.

For fiscal observers, that may be the most important deadline of all.