

Campaign 2008: Will Agriculture Be Heard?



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In the recent caucuses and primary elections the candidates have concentrated on broad concerns and national issues. As the final candidate from each party is selected, the November campaign will be underway. Those with interests in agriculture should explore how each candidate will deal with policies that will affect the future production, marketing and processing of agricultural products.

The economy. Many are concerned with economic conditions. Congress has passed emergency measures trying to prevent a major recession. Fortunately crop and livestock prices are higher than in the recent past, but input costs will threaten net profits. The final farm bill that is approved will be implemented by the new Administration next year and agricultural and agribusiness leaders should ask how each presidential candidate will maintain or attempt to change the law that is passed.

Taxes. New taxes in the 2007 farm bill passed by the House have brought a threatened veto from the President. Farmers and their families are concerned about whether future estate taxes that will affect the transfer of land and other property to the next generation. The income tax changes passed during the current Bush administration have benefitted many farmers and agricultural industries. Some candidates have called these tax changes benefits for the rich. But lower capital gain tax rates, expense deductions and lower rates have benefitted many in agriculture.

National security. Ever since September 11, 2001, we have had to face the risk of further terrorist attacks. Cities, power plants, and transportation facilities are considered most vulnerable to attack. But our food system on farms, processing plants, and distribution points must be alert for the dangers to the safety of our food supply.

Immigration. The influx of illegal immigrants in recent years has brought major concerns. Efforts to secure our borders have been only partly successful. Although most immigrants want to find work to support their families, the risks of terrorists and illegal drugs increase the dangers of uncontrolled entrance across the borders.

Agriculture is only part of the problem involved with illegal immigration. Efforts to pass immigration reform this past year failed because many thought those who had illegally entered the country were being given amnesty for breaking our laws. Yet with millions of illegal individuals involved, it seems an impossible task to send them back to their own country.

Many immigrants work on farms helping produce and harvest labor intensive crops that could not be produced without them. The American Farm Bureau and other agricultural groups have called for a guest worker program that would permit employers on farms and in processing plants to legally employ immigrants for specified times and permitting them to re-

turn to their own country during part of the year.

Employers must be protected from illegal seizures of their workers and must be able to legally employ immigrants to keep their plants running. Those groups that claim that immigrants are replacing domestic workers do not recognize that the workers who need jobs are usually not ready to move to locations where immigrants are willing to live and work.

Immigration and employing foreign workers is one of the most difficult issues that the next president must face. Congress and the current administration have authorized building a fence along the Mexican border. But the building process has been slow and even with stepped up border patrol, illegal immigrants have not been stopped. More comprehensive policies will be needed.

As long as this country offers more employment opportunities to immigrants than their home country, there will be pressure for immigrants, legal and illegal, to cross the border.

Renewable fuels. Ethanol has moved to the forefront as oil prices have soared in the last few years. Trying to reduce our dependance on foreign oil imports has become a popular cause. Agriculture lies in the midst of any effort to produce renewable fuels. But how much ethanol can provide the needed supply of renewable fuels remains a question. The next administration must have vision and foresight to develop several sources of renewable fuels and include a broader energy policy beyond ethanol.

International trade. Efforts to further improve our trade policies through the World Trade organization have stalled. Congress has not extended the President's authority to negotiate without Congressional amendments. Such authority will be needed if any WTO trade agreements can be negotiated in the future. Many agricultural commodities have benefitted from expanding exports. Some commodities including sugar and cotton face problems with expanding free trade since some WTO member countries object to our current support policies for these crops.

How many of these issues will the presidential candidates discuss during the campaign? Unless those interested in agriculture raise some key questions, the broader urban and consumer issues may prevail in the next administration. Agricultural producer and business organizations should invite the major presidential and congressional candidates to meetings, forums, and field days to discuss these important agricultural issues and get the candidates' views on them.

The next president and members of Congress will face very difficult decisions to keep our nation safe and prosperous. Agricultural interests will not always coincide with positions promoted by business, consumer, organized labor and environmental groups. But during the campaign could be the best time to find out their understanding of agricultural issues and what your organizations believe is the best course of action. Δ

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