

# Who Should Be The Next Secretary Of Agriculture?

HAROLD D. GUITHER



URBANA, ILL.

**A** new president has been elected and a new Administration will include a new cabinet. Who will president-elect Obama choose as his next Secretary of Agriculture? I suggest Charles W. Stenholm.

Stenholm served in the House of Representatives from 1979 to 1995. He was a member of the Committee on Agriculture throughout his 26 year career and served as the Committee's ranking Democrat for his last eight years until 2004. He earned a reputation for building bipartisan alliances in areas as diverse as agriculture, resource conservation, food safety, Social Security, energy, health care and budget.

A native of Stamford, Texas, he was born on October 26, 1938, grew up on a cotton farm, and earned B.S. and M. S. Degrees from Texas Tech University in Lubbock. He operated a cotton farm in Jones County near Abilene for many years and also worked as an agriculture teacher, and with the local USDA predecessor agency to today's Farm Service Agency before his election to Congress in 1978. He was also a delegate to the Democratic National Convention in 1972.

In Congress he was one of the most conservative Democrats in the House. He worked closely with fellow Texas representative Larry Combest to shepherd the 2002 Farm Bill through Congress. He was a longtime supporter of a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution. When animal terrorists invaded university and government research facilities, he worked with other members to pass the act that made vandalism at research facilities a federal crime.

Stenholm frequently clashed with President Bill Clinton, and voted for three of the four articles of impeachment against him. However, he was a severe critic of the Bush Administration's fiscal policy and voted against making Bush's tax cut permanent.

Despite his moderate to conservative voting record, Stenholm faced several tough reelection campaigns in the late 1990s. He was a major target of the Tom Delay-engineered redrawing of

Texas' congressional districts in 2003. Most of his former district was placed in the heavily Republican Lubbock-based district. The area that included his cotton farm was thrown into the Republican Amarillo-based district.

After his 2004 defeat, Stenholm was mentioned by some major news organizations as a candidate for Secretary of Agriculture in President Bush's second term cabinet. In the end Bush nominated Nebraska Governor Mike Johanns, a fellow Republican for that post. (Johanns resigned last year to run for the Senate from Nebraska and was elected.)

After leaving Congress, Stenholm became a senior policy adviser for the Washington firm of Olsson Frank Weeda, Terman, Bode and Maatz, described as the nation's premier law firm. He represented various agricultural interests including the horse meat industry. In 2006 he was the most visible lobbyist for three foreign owned horse slaughter plants in the United States fighting legislation that forced them to close. Meat from these horses was used as food in some European countries, Japan and Mexico, for zoo animal food, and for medical purposes. Horses that have no other use, must now be sent to Mexico or Canada for slaughter.

I met Charles Stenholm in 2005 when he spoke to the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers annual meeting in Texas. His broad knowledge of agricultural issues and problems is most impressive. Recalling our conversation with a small group of us after he spoke, I believe that farmers and agricultural leaders who meet him as I did would feel that he is really one of us.

When I was actively associated with policy educators at land grant universities across the country, my friends at Texas A & M always spoke highly of Congressman Stenholm.

The new Administration will face many difficult problems. In some ways agriculture may be able to survive better than some other parts of our battered economy. But appointing a capable person who knows agriculture first hand like Charles Stenholm would create strong support for the new Administration among farmers and agricultural industry. Δ

*Harold D. Guither is University of Illinois Professor, agricultural policy, retired at Urbana.*