

Why The Rural Vote Still Matters In Key Senate Races



SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

Senate Democrats, along with their key stakeholders, recently huddled in a Senate office building to send a strong message to rural America: We've got your back. And the Senators, who hailed from Alaska, Delaware and several states in between, made it pointedly clear that – unlike the GOP-controlled House, which failed to pass a new farm bill when the 2008 version expired last year – they plan to quickly approve a new five-year measure later this month.

The Rural Summit, sponsored by the Democratic Steering and Outreach Committee, was a half-day event that focused on a number of rural issues, ranging from the farm bill to infrastructure and education. Over 200 leaders from both within the beltway and around the country attended.

The summit was chaired by Sens. Mark Begich, D-Alaska, and Mark Pryor, D-Ark. – two senators with re-election hopes in 2014.

The session also featured panel discussions with Sens. Chris Coons, D-Del., Jon Tester, D-Mont., Tim Johnson, D-S.D., Heidi Heitkamp, D-N.D., Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn, and Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich.

Former Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman provided the keynote address. I was asked to serve as a moderator for the first panel discussion.

"Agriculture is a core strength in the U.S. economy," Pryor said. Lawmakers must make sure "when we do things in Washington, we're not leaving rural America behind."

"It is important to have a conversation about what the Senate should be doing and to discuss the challenges rural America faces," noted Begich in opening the summit. He noted that there is a lot of strong economic activity in rural America but there are also gaps, or areas where people are really struggling.

Asked to rate, on a one to ten scale, the rural economic conditions in his home state of Montana, Tester said that it's probably a 7.5, but "in Indian country, it's zero."

Tester, who is one of two farmers serving in the Senate, but who does not currently serve on the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee, was probably the most critical of current farm policy.

"The agriculture program hasn't worked well," he noted, while citing population declines in his hometown. "One of the biggest challenges is that nobody lives there."

When he graduated from high school, there were 160 students, but now those numbers have declined to only 60, he said.

Stabenow told summit participants that her team worked hard to pass a new farm bill last year.

"And then something happened that has never happened before in the history of the country," she said. "The leadership in the House would not take up a farm bill. And so we're having, unfortunately, to go back at it again."

"We need your help to make sure that rural America and agriculture is a priority when it comes to the full House of Representatives," she added.

Whether the Democrats renewed focus on rural America will translate into rural voter support in 2014 remains to be seen. Twenty Senate Democratic seats are in contention during the next cycle- including Begich and Pryor - and several others, like Johnson, have already decided to retire.

In the House, Democrats need only 17 victories in order to flip the lower chamber back to Democratic control.

Despite inaction on the farm bill last year, farmers and ranchers largely voted for Republican candidates in the 2012 House elections, and an Agri-Pulse survey last October indicated that farmers blamed Democrats more than Republicans for the lack of farm bill passage in the House.

But some farm groups are becoming increasingly frustrated that GOP leaders continue to ignore their pleas and drag their feet. A few House members have privately told Agri-Pulse that they worry about problems with their own 2014 campaigns if something is not done in 2013.

Perhaps that's why House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., recently committed to a floor vote on the farm bill later this year.

For his part, Pryor emphasized the importance of passing a workable farm bill for all regions and reducing regulatory burdens in rural America.

And Glickman concluded the event by challenging participants to look at farm policy through new lenses because times have changed.

"The glass is not half empty, the glass is half full. Agriculture and food are big issues now," emphasized Glickman.

With growing global demand for food, Glickman said that, "after many, many, many years of low farm prices and farm programs always being based on low prices, I predict those days are over."

"That doesn't mean we're going to have heaven on earth in farm country," he said. But he stressed the importance of developing policy based on the new market realities of feeding 9 billion people globally by 2050.

"Congress is moving much more in the direction of good risk management programs, good crop insurance programs," Glickman said. "Frankly, we ought to replace most of the existing farm programs that are out there, because if you have a much stronger farm economy then the government shouldn't be sending out payments." Δ

SARA WYANT: Editor of Agri-Pulse, a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy. To contact her, go to: <http://www.agri-pulse.com/>

syngenta®

Link Directly To: **SYNGENTA**