

Senate Budget Chair Shares Thoughts on Agriculture

by Jon Dockter, NAFA

According to the most recent census, just over 683,000 residents call North Dakota home - only Vermont and Wyoming are smaller. Yet, when it comes to representation in Washington, D.C., few states have a more influential and well-respected Senator.

Senator Kent Conrad has spent more than 30 years in public service beginning with a six-year stint as North Dakota's Tax Commissioner before a successful 1986 bid for the U.S. Senate. His public service has won him acclaim for both his effectiveness and budget acumen. *Time* magazine called Senator Conrad "one of those who make a difference" and labeled him as one of "America's Ten Best Senators." *The American* magazine ranked him as one of the "10 Most Economically Literate Members of Congress."

Conrad is considered a leading Congressional "deficit hawk," is a member of Capitol Hill's "Gang of Six" (a bipartisan group of senators focused on debt-reduction), and has been Chair of the Senate Budget Committee since early 2007.

Recently, NAFA had the opportunity to pose questions to North Dakota's senior senator.

What first got you interested in politics? Growing up, my family was in the newspaper business and we followed current events. My father, grandfathers, and uncles all followed politics closely and taught me early on the importance of public service and trying to make a difference in your community.

What is the biggest challenge facing agriculture today? The misconception by those living in urban areas that there is no need for farm programs. Powerful media outlets on the east and west coasts, along with opponents of government programs, have downplayed the vital role production agriculture plays in the health of the nation and have been unfairly critical of federal farm programs. It is vital that we develop a new Farm Bill that is easily defensible to the broader public.

How do you impress upon urban lawmakers the importance of maintaining some sort of safety net for farmers? It is important to continue to beat the drum and educate those lawmakers who may not serve a large agriculture constituency. They need to know the full story. They need to know the challenges facing America's farmers, such as the trade advantages held by our global competitors, the market swings, and weather related disasters. And they need to keep in mind that our farm programs produce the safest, most abundant, and least expensive supply of food in the world. That's important to their constituents because they all consume the food, fiber, and fuel produced by American agriculture.

What are your priorities in this Farm Bill? My two main goals for a new Farm Bill include maintaining a strong safety net for producers while, at the same time, contributing to deficit reduction. The legislation I introduced last month with Senators Hoeven and Baucus does just that. The "Revenue

Loss Assistance and Crop Insurance Enhancement Act is bipartisan legislation that reduces farm program complexity and duplication, strengthens the federal crop insurance program, permanently extends livestock disaster assistance, and serves as a major component of a new Farm Bill.

Additional priorities include the enhancement of agriculture's natural resource base, ensuring nutrition assistance for the least fortunate among us, and expanding our capacity to produce renewable energy.

Do you believe the Farm Bill will be completed this year? I am very hopeful the Farm Bill will be completed this year, but the budget proposal passed by the House of Representatives will make it very difficult to do so. I have repeatedly told my colleagues that there is no advantage in waiting to do a new Farm Bill until next year. With the fiscal challenges our nation is facing, there is no guarantee it would be any easier to finish a Farm Bill next year; it may be even harder. And agriculture stakeholders need the certainty of a Farm Bill in order to make decisions for the future.

Over the last 10 years we've seen a decline in alfalfa acres which could accelerate if we adopt a Farm Bill which re-couples farm payments with actual production. How can a Farm Bill be written in such a way that it doesn't harm the acreage of non-program crops? During the Farm Bill deliberations, I have pushed to ensure commodity program payments are limited to total base acres, as opposed to basing payments on any planted acres. Basing payments on planted acres would have provided an incentive for some producers to start planting program crops on acreage that had traditionally been in non-program crops.

Conservation benefits of alfalfa are an important aspect of its value to producers in crop rotations. Do you expect that the Conservation Stewardship Program will continue in the next Farm Bill? Yes, I expect the CSP will continue with some improvements and modifications. Acres will likely be limited due to the larger effort in the Farm Bill to contribute to deficit reduction, but it will still be funded at a reasonable level.

In early 2011, Senator Conrad announced he would not be running for re-election in 2012, bringing to an end a distinguished career in the U.S. Senate. Conrad said his remaining priorities are to bring the national debt under control, reduce U.S. dependence on foreign energy, and write a new five-year Farm Bill.

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Senator Kent Conrad (D-ND)