



News from NAFA

NAFA Visits with Secretary Ed Schafer

By Jon Dockter, NAFA Associate Director, and Beth Nelson, NAFA President

Recently, the National Alfalfa & Forage Alliance sat down with Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer to discuss farm policy, the farm bill, and other issues of interest to alfalfa and forage producers. The Secretary was generous with his time and touched on a number of topics important to the forage industry:

Farm Bill Implementation. Secretary Schafer is pleased with how the farm bill implementation process is going; he indicated USDA is actually ahead of schedule. Receiving only \$55 of the \$200 million USDA requested from Congress for implementation didn't dampen Schafer's enthusiasm saying, "We have software to change and employees to train, but we do have a supplemental request in before Congress for \$179 million and I believe we'll get the money." Schafer expects a seamless transition with the incoming administration. "We put an implementation team together with three co-chairs with one member from each of the 29 different agencies under the umbrella of USDA. They're experienced people, career folks, and people who went through the 1990 implementation so we've got a model to work from. I think we're progressing well."

Conservation Stewardship Program and Beneficial Crop Rotations. Of particular interest to alfalfa and forage producers is the new Conservation Stewardship Program which offers supplemental payments to producers engaging in "beneficial" or "resource-conserving" crop rotations. The crops are designated by the Secretary. Although the specific crops haven't yet been identified, Schafer was confident alfalfa would be included. "We recognize the clear and compelling environmental benefits that come with the use of alfalfa in crop rotations, and I anticipate the CSP will offer this crop opportunity in rotation on both irrigated and non-irrigated acres."

Cellulosic Ethanol Production. Schafer is excited about the potential of cellulosic ethanol production and the steps USDA is taking to bring the process to commercialization. "We're spending about \$30 million per year in our laboratories to move ethanol production out of biomasses into a commercialized process." Schafer sees potential in a host of alternatives which can provide cellulosic ethanol. "Wood chips, new-growth trees, orange peels, cornstalks, alfalfa, we're looking at a lot of different things." Schafer added the new farm bill contains more than \$1 billion for cellulosic research. "We're confident that we'll see cellulosic ethanol become a reality sooner than a lot of people predict. We're starting to get it out of the lab and into the street, which is the most important step we can make."

Ethanol Production and Food Prices.

Schafer responded to the notion that the Renewable Fuels Standard and ethanol production are solely responsible for the increase in food prices consumers are seeing – Schafer contends that the sudden and dramatic increase in petroleum is the real culprit. "We believe that at most, it's (ethanol production) about a 10% factor. The cost of energy of course is the big issue here. Think of transportation costs, packaging costs, processing costs, all of which run on petro fuels and drive up the cost of food tremendously." Schafer noted that food price increases in the United States have gone up to 5-5.5% from a traditional 2-2.5%, which in reality adds only \$5 to a \$100 grocery tab.



Secretary of Agriculture Ed Schafer

Although it has put pressure on livestock producers, Schafer believes ethanol production and the Renewable Fuels Standard are important public policy. "Not only for economic activity in rural areas but to reduce dependency on foreign oil. We want to export farm crops, not money. We believe the Renewable Fuels Standard can be met without further impact on food costs and we're going to pursue that in any way we can at USDA."

Roundup Ready® Alfalfa, Biotechnology.

Schafer commented on the environmental assessment USDA's APHIS is currently working on for Roundup Ready alfalfa saying, "We want this process to go through properly, we're going to do the environmental assessment without trying to maneuver it one way or another. We want it to be scientifically based on the facts." Schafer has long supported biotechnology and the benefits it holds. While Governor of North Dakota, Schafer co-founded the Governors Biotechnology Partnership in an effort to increase public understanding and support for the benefits of agricultural biotechnology. Schafer continues his support for biotechnology as Secretary. "There is clear evidence that being able to plant a crop, in this case alfalfa, where you can use less inputs on it, less herbicides, less fungicides or whatever you're applying, it allows you to have less runoff and less environmental problems. I'm a champion of this."

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