



News from NAFA

Salazar's Love of Agriculture on Display in His Washington Office

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

Colorado's 3rd District Congressman John Salazar doesn't wear dress shoes while at work in his Washington, D.C. office, he feels much more "at home" in cowboy boots. Not surprising since he remains one of only a handful of the 535 members of Congress who are still actively engaged in farming. He grows potatoes, canola, and, of course, alfalfa on his 4,000 acre ranch in south central Colorado. He also raises and markets crossbred Black Angus and Limousin cattle through Salazar Natural Beef.

Raised on the family farm, established in the 1860's by his great-grandfather, Congressman Salazar shared a bedroom with five siblings. They had no running water or electricity. Nostalgic reminders of home can be found peppered throughout his DC office. Scenic photos of the family ranch, black and white pictures of his parents as young adults, a picture of the Congressman with his brother (Secretary of Interior Ken Salazar), and a copy of John Fielder's *Ranches of Colorado* which highlights the state's 100 most scenic ranches (his is featured on page 140) serve to remind him of his roots and those he represents.

Congressman Salazar brings a unique perspective to his job that, unfortunately, is becoming all too scarce in Washington due to the constant migration of people from rural to urban areas – an in-depth understanding of agriculture. NAFA representatives recently sat down with the Congressman to discuss this and other issues important to forage producers.

"You know when I was debating what became the 2008 Farm Bill, I had a member of the Ag Committee actually ask me if chocolate milk really comes from brown cows," Congressman Salazar noted unbelievably, "I asked if he was joking and he assured me he wasn't." That was a watershed moment for the Congressman and gave him an indication of both the importance and shortage of a strong agriculture background in Congress.

"The most difficult thing for me is trying to get people to understand how hard farmers work and how difficult it is for farmers to produce food in this country. They think because you farm 4,000 acres you've got a huge operation. In our area, a 4,000 acre farm is about average. The economies of scale continue to grow because our margins get slimmer and slimmer so we have to spread our costs across more acres."

Salazar continued, "I think people have lost sight of the fact that what made this country great was that we were a rich agricultural nation. If we ever lose our food independence or our ability to produce food in this country, we could very well jeopardize our overall independence. It used to be that 60-70% of the members of Congress were either farmers or had close ties to agriculture. Now there are only 4 or 5 of us in Congress that are actually still engaged in agriculture."

Congressman Salazar also weighed in on the continuing Round-Up Ready® alfalfa (RRA) issue. "One of the things that I hope we can do is to streamline the environmental reviews," referring to the almost 3-year review of RRA. "I think we, in agriculture, have done a very

poor job of educating the public about the safety of biotech crops. On my farm, I produce Roundup Ready® certified canola seed so I know exactly how nice those systems are. I think one of the things we have to stress is how Roundup Ready® reduces the overall amount of chemicals a producer has to use. I think USDA really needs to promote biotech products and focus on educating the public about the potential benefits these products hold, as well as stressing the safety of biotech crops as a whole."

The conversation turned to the environment and climate change legislation (H.R. 2454) that was passed in the House of Representatives in June 2009. Congressman Salazar opposed the legislation due, in part, to the impact it would have on his constituents. "This bill would have raised utility rates in my district anywhere from \$1,800 - \$4,000 per household. I represent a rural district comprised mostly of working families. They could not have afforded that."

He also felt clean energy technologies were short-changed in the bill. "You know, 85% of the utilities in my district are tied to coal burning plants. Clean coal technology is the key. But this bill didn't have enough funding to support it. I think we have to invest heavily in clean coal technology because I believe we can create a revenue stream by perfecting it and then selling it to China. By doing so it would actually have a quicker effect on climate change." Hoping these issues will be addressed on the Senate side Salazar added, "I'm a strong proponent of making sure that we curb our greenhouse gas emissions, but we can't do that by taxing people. I think we can do it more efficiently by investing in these new technologies."

Congressman Salazar continues to be a strong proponent of biofuels as well, particularly cellulosic, noting its potential for reducing our reliance on foreign sources of oil. "I am very supportive of new biofuel technology and production. I think we as a nation can replace petroleum based fuels with cellulosic ethanol in a matter of years if we have the will to do so. We need to remember that this can play a key role in addressing climate change as well."

Finally, Salazar noted the lobbying effort by the petroleum industry as playing a key role in the erosion of support for biofuels saying, "The oil and gas companies were very successful in splitting us apart last year and the year before when wheat and corn prices went through the roof by blaming it on the production of ethanol. It was a campaign in which millions of dollars were spent and they were very successful in splitting our agricultural interests where the livestock producers were pitted against the corn producers. I believe that what we need to do is to make sure we stay united."



(L to R): Mark Wagoner, NAFA Director; Congressman John Salazar, D-CO; Beth Nelson, NAFA President; Jon Dockter, NAFA Associate Director.