

# Agricultural Roots Drive Senator's Commitment to Public Service

by Jon Dockter, NAFA

**A**s a fourth-generation South Dakotan, Senator Tim Johnson's roots run as deep as alfalfa. His great-grandfather homesteaded in Centerville, SD and instilled a strong belief in hard work and an understanding of agriculture's importance in maintaining strong communities.

After eight years in the state legislature, Johnson ran for the U.S. House in 1986 and served there for 10 years prior to running for the U.S. Senate where he has served since 1997.

Recently, NAFA visited with Senator Johnson about his political career, the Farm Bill, and agricultural research.

**Did you always have a desire to serve in public office, or did your interest develop gradually as you began your professional career?** South Dakota provided me with a terrific education, from grade school through law school. Because of the solid foundation growing up in South Dakota provided, I knew I wanted to serve the public. It was an honor to represent South Dakotans in Pierre and now in Washington and give back to a state that has been so good to me.

**What do you find most difficult about being an advocate for agriculture?** In the last few years, political partisanship has reached a fever-pitch that has made searching for common ground on sound policy difficult. Unfortunately, agriculture has not been immune to our current political environment. There is often a fundamental misunderstanding among some in Congress about the variety of factors unique to agriculture that necessitate a safety net or the important role agriculture plays – not only in South Dakota and rural communities – but in our national economy as well.

**In recent years, public sentiment against farm subsidies has grown. How do you stress the importance of maintaining an adequate safety net for farmers?** Experts project the world's population will reach close to 9 billion people by 2050. In the U.S. we enjoy the most affordable and abundant food supply in the world – with the average American spending roughly 9.4% of disposable income on food (*USDA's Economic Research Service*). If we are going to feed a growing population while ensuring consumers have affordable food, the agricultural safety net needs to be maintained and strengthened. Additionally, the economic importance of agriculture to rural communities cannot be overstated. In South Dakota, agriculture has a \$20 billion a year impact while supporting hundreds of thousands of jobs. Agriculture is the economic engine driving our rural communities, and without viable farms, ranches, and livestock producers, our small towns and Main Street businesses would face significant financial hardships.

**The new Agriculture Risk Coverage (ARC) program bases eligibility on acreage in program crops from '09-12. With South Dakota being the nation's leading producer of alfalfa in terms of acres, are you concerned this eligibility standard may penalize producers who have grown alfalfa in rotation with other program crops during that time?** I think it is important that



Senator Tim Johnson (D-SD)

our federal agriculture policy move away from establishing payment levels on base acres from many years ago which may not reflect actual current production on that land. I don't anticipate this shift in policy will serve to "penalize" producers, particularly since the need for forages will certainly not diminish.

**While the Senate has done its part, do you believe we'll have a new farm bill by the end of the year?** In a highly partisan and contentious political atmosphere, the Senate has shown it can pass bipartisan legislation that reauthorizes Farm Bill programs, reduces the deficit, supports millions of jobs, and makes meaningful reforms. While the timeframe is tight and disagreements persist with the amount of cuts to nutrition programs and other contentious policy issues, I am hopeful the House will pass a bill so we can give producers certainty before current programs expire on September 30th.

**With the current budget challenges we face, how do you balance the need for cuts to federal spending with the need to maintain funding for ag research, such as the Alfalfa & Forage Research Program you supported?** While I am committed to returning our country to a responsible, long-term budget, I firmly believe we must continue making smart investments in our future. Federal investment in agricultural research has led to substantial increases in productivity and significant economic opportunities for producers and rural communities. One such program deserving such resources is the Alfalfa and Forage Research Program, and as such, I led a letter earlier this year with some of my colleagues to Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee Chair Herb Kohl (D-WI); this program supports important research on a variety of critical issues facing forages including yield improvement, bioenergy uses, and new storage and harvest systems. While it is critical that we get our country's fiscal house in order, it would be shortsighted to undercut the important work of our agricultural research institutions and the investments we have made thus far.

**Forage producers are interested in using forage crops in the production of cellulosic ethanol. What is your position on using alfalfa and other biomass crops for cellulosic ethanol?** I have long supported the development of biofuels. With the development of the corn-ethanol industry, South Dakota has become a leading producer of renewable energy. We have seen continued research into different feedstocks, including forages, for cellulosic ethanol. The Sun Grant Initiative at SDSU has given us a better understanding about the role various biomass feedstocks can play in our energy future.

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