



# News from NAFA

## House Agriculture Committee Chairman Visits with NAFA

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

After serving in the State Senate from 1977-1986, Collin Peterson turned his attention to Washington where, after three tries, he was elected to represent Minnesota's 7th district in 1990. Since then, not surprisingly, Congressman Peterson has been a relentless supporter of agriculture. So much so that he was named by his peers as Chairman of the House Agriculture Committee in January of 2007 after Democrats regained a majority. As Chairman, the vast majority of his time over the past two years was spent on the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act of 2008, better known as the Farm Bill. By building consensus both in Congress and among commodity groups, Chairman Peterson is widely credited with the bill's successful passage.

Recently, the Chairman took the time to visit with NAFA about the Farm Bill, USDA, and the new Agriculture Secretary.

**Farm Bill.** Congressman Peterson talked about the difficulty in developing a consensus and support for the '08 Farm Bill noting all the special interests involved and the considerations which had to be made. "It was very difficult. You can see that by the amount of time that it took. We had a lot of different things going on here that we haven't had before. We had to follow pay-go rules, we had a secretary who was out trying to do his own bill, we had to gin up support from the states which actually caused trouble – raising phony issues, a lot of special interest groups that had agendas trying to get payment limits, influencing the large newspaper editorial writers. So it was a difficult climate."

The difficulty in its passage, however, strengthened Peterson's resolve and in the end the bill passed with veto-proof support. "There were a lot of people who had to be taken care of – fruits and vegetables, a lot of interest in increasing food stamps, the energy title, so trying to get all of those things covered and stay within pay-go, it was not an easy task but in the end we worked through it. It was hard on the House side, then it was hard resolving things in the Senate, and then the President vetoed it. Then we overrode it. I don't think it could get much harder than it was."

**Alfalfa/Forage Research Program.** The newly created Alfalfa/Forage Research Program, of special interest to hay and forage producers, was authorized in the new Farm Bill as a high priority research area. In talking to the Congressman about the potential for its funding in rough economic times he offered his support. "Well, we hope it'll get funded. We're hoping to get back to regular order in the appropriations process. We will be doing what we can at any level to make sure that happens. Obviously, we're going to be in a tough climate if they borrow all the money they're talking about. But we shouldn't short change policies we put in place to move us in a direction we need to go. I can't guarantee anything but we're hopeful."

**Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP).** The newly created CSP offers incentive payments to producers who agree to adopt

"resource-conserving crop rotations" which is defined as any rotation that includes at least one "resource-conserving crop" (as defined by the secretary). The Chairman is anxious for those crops to be identified. "We were told that it (designating "resource-conserving" crops) should have been done by now. I talked to Vilsack recently, and he knows that this thing is behind schedule and that they need to move quickly on this. So hopefully, once we get the new team in place they will buckle down and in the next couple, three weeks get the rest of the decisions made because it's dragged on long enough."



Chairman Collin Peterson  
2009 Outstanding Service Award Recipient  
Midwest Forage Association (NAFA affiliate)

**Tom Vilsack as New Secretary of Agriculture.** In discussing the new Secretary of Agriculture and the daunting tasks that lie ahead of him, Peterson was clear on what he thinks is a priority. "The first thing is getting the Farm Bill implemented. We're going to have quite a bit that didn't get done under the previous administration. That'll be the first thing. He's got a lot of learning to do and I think he knows this. Being a Governor, he dealt with agriculture at that level but really wasn't involved in the Farm Bill process, really hasn't got any in-depth knowledge of what we went through with the Farm Bill, all the different aspects of agriculture at the national level, and also the bureaucracy within the USDA. So a lot of his first year is just going to be a learning experience – implementing the farm bill."

Peterson also offered Vilsack advice on how to hit the ground running adding, "I've advised him to get some people that have been through these things to put into high level positions to help guide him. From everything that I can tell, he's a very smart guy, a good manager, and I think he will be fine. But, obviously, given his background, he's not going to walk in there and be able to do everything the first day. The other thing that I hope to work with him on is looking at the organization of the department – trying to make the department work better, re-structure it so it fits the mission. In today's agricultural world trying to get the computer systems finally into the 21st century and deal with all the day-to-day crises that go with being the Secretary of Agriculture – he'll be busy."