



Politics and Farming: An Important Combination for our Future

How strong is your tolerance for a political discussion? Does your blood pressure rise at the mere mention of the “P” word? If the polls are correct, most citizens have little regard for politicians or the political process. I suspect that we farmers are critical also. The difference, in my opinion, is that we are more involved in the political process than the general population. That difference is important today and will keep gaining in importance as our numbers continue to decline.

Farmers make up a very small piece of the population pie, with less than one percent of the population actually deriving income from farming. Yet our industry is very important to this state and our country. Agriculture is the number two industry in Michigan, with dairy being the largest single commodity group. I think that concept is hard for people to grasp, because there are many small pieces to the production puzzle in farming when compared to the more obvious large centralized factories with large centralized labor forces for other types of production. Therefore, educating people and in particular, politicians, of the importance of our economic

impact is a difficult but very necessary task. Meetings with our senators and representatives provide our members with the opportunity to get to know their legislators and voice opinions on various pieces of legislation coming up this year. One important example is the pending Farm Bill.

Michigan’s term limit structure increases the need for ongoing political education processes. With representatives limited to serving three two-year terms and senators limited to two four-year terms, it seems that you no sooner establish a relationship with your own representative or senator when they suddenly become ineligible to hold the office. Then you are faced with starting over with his or her replacement. Sometimes that’s good and other times bad, but in every case it increases the responsibility on each of us to educate the new legislator.

Michigan Representative Judy Emmons (R-Sheridan) who is also an MMPA member, attended our April Board meeting to discuss legislative issues currently facing Michigan. Probably more important, we discussed with her how we could be more effective when dealing with our legislators. Number one is for each of us to establish a relationship with our legislators. If you don’t already know your legislator on a first name basis, take the time to do so. It gives you a chance to explain what you do and how you do it. With a personal relationship established, it becomes much easier and more effective to call that legislator to provide your critical

input on any particular legislative action. Her parting advice was that dairy producers, along with others who understand the agriculture production industry, must be encouraged to run for public office. If we elect more public officials with agricultural roots we improve our chances of “ag friendly” legislation.

At the national level, MMPA is currently encouraging members of the U.S. Congress to join the Dairy Caucus. The Dairy Caucus was formed by a bipartisan, bicameral group of lawmakers at the national level who represent dairy producing regions. Its purpose is to develop and promote policy that supports the dairy industry. So far, we have participation from the following Michigan legislators: Senator Debbie Stabenow, Congressman Dave Camp, Congressman Pete Hoekstra, Congresswoman Candice Miller and a promise to join from Congressman Tim Walberg.

Since Congressman Walberg was elected to his first term in November, meetings in his district with our members have led to him having a better understanding of the dairy industry and his promise to join the Dairy Caucus. This is particularly important, because he is a member of the House Ag Committee.

Dairy farmers have been meeting with Congressman Hoekstra on a regular basis in his district as well. I think it is safe to say that without forming these relationships, he would not have joined the Dairy Caucus. We are grateful that all these people have chosen to learn

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Continued on Page 9

Agriculture Director Irwin to Retire

State Agriculture Director Mitch Irwin announced on July 18, 2007 that he is retiring as State Agriculture Director to pursue private sector business ventures. Irwin made his official announcement in a letter to the Michigan Agriculture Commission which met in East Lansing. Irwin is expected to leave his post on or before August 17.

Agriculture Commission Chair James Byrum accepted Irwin's resignation and complimented his leadership on agriculture issues.

"Mitch Irwin has been a dynamic advocate for agriculture and has been especially effective in promoting the emerging bio-fuel and alternative energy sectors," Byrum said. "We are grateful for his service and wish him every success in the future."

Governor Jennifer M. Granholm commended Irwin for his years of dedicated service and creativity he brought to state government.

"Mitch has been an enthusiastic champion for protecting our food supply, promoting Michigan-grown products, and preserving critical farmland," said Granholm. "Mitch also helped launch our effort to create thriving bio-fuel and alternative energy industries in Michigan, a critical part of our plan to revitalize Michigan's economy."

Irwin said his decision brings to a close a career of public service in state government that began with his election to the Michigan Senate in the 1970s and is looking forward to pursuing private business opportunities.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed the challenges of leading the Michigan Department of Agriculture (MDA) to help expand agriculture and diversify Michigan's economy," he said, "It is simply time for me to return to the private sector to pursue opportunities in business development, investment, and real estate ventures. MDA has an outstanding team of dedicated professionals, and I have been honored to work with them and with the commission."

By statute, the Agriculture Commission appoints the director. Chairman Byrum said the selection process will begin immediately and expects the commission to solicit, interview, and select the new director in the next few weeks.

MMPA Matters

Continued from Page 5

more about the dairy industry and recognize the value of dairy to the state and to their individual districts within the state. We look forward to the positive effect that their proactive approach will have on our industry and the citizens of our state. As MMPA members, we must work closely with all of our legislators to enhance the value that the dairy industry adds to the state of Michigan.

You don't have to make a trip to Washington D.C. to be effective. Time is a precious com-

modity for all of us today, and we all want to use it judiciously. Fortunately, our legislators make it easier to meet with them today than in years past. They all provide office hours in their districts to meet with constituents on a regular basis, so take a little time today to make an appointment with your legislators. Get to know each other so that phone call you need to make concerning a particular bill in Congress is a very effective phone call.



WTO Talks Again Produce No Agreement

A meeting of four highly-influential World Trade Organization members - the U.S., the EU, Brazil and India - suddenly broke down in mid June before negotiations were scheduled to end. The primary reason for the breakdown in negotiations was an inability to move forward on the issue of Non-Agricultural Market Access. The meeting among the four was to be an important precursor to achieving the necessary progress to allow the discussions with the full WTO membership to move forward this summer.

WTO countries plan to continue to negotiate, but specific talks are not expected to resume among this group of four. Negotiations will likely now revert to the broader WTO membership for continued dialogue. The Chairmen of the WTO negotiating committees are expected to release new papers aimed at forging compromise among the membership. A complicating factor in achieving a deal, however, is the lack of time that remains to achieve an agreement by very early 2008. The collapse of discussions among these four key players will significantly complicate the ability to reach a deal by then.

Also, President Bush's Trade Promotion Authority expired at the end of June, without which the prospect of passing a large trade bill through Congress becomes more daunting.