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Johanns' Exit Alters Nebraska Politics, USDA Leadership Picture

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Announcing his immediate resignation this morning alongside President Bush in the White House Rose Garden, Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns changes the political landscape in Nebraska, potentially the U.S. Senate political balance in 2009, and the management of USDA.

The former governor will become the favorite -- but not yet a sure thing -- in the crowded race for the Republican nomination to succeed retiring Sen. **Chuck Hagel**, R-Neb., in next year's election. And even if he wins the GOP nod, he may face another one-time governor, former Sen. **Bob Kerrey**, D-Neb., who likely would win the Democratic nomination in a walk. That would make the general election competitive. Nebraska has not voted for a Democrat for president since 1964 and deviated only a couple of times in the last half century from an all-GOP House delegation. However, it has elected many more Democrats than Republicans to the U.S. Senate.

Look for former Rep. **Hal Daub**, R-Neb., and Atty. Gen. **Jon Bruning** to try to tie Johanns' to Bush's moderate immigration policies and to resurrect Johanns' criticism, when he was governor, of a Clinton Administration crackdown on illegal aliens in Nebraska meat packing plants. They also can be expected to say that he walked away from the fight over the farm bill -- a charge that may resonate more in the state than in Washington, where it's recognized that administration influence on the farm bill is diminished and delays can be attributed to current, not prospective, members of the U.S. Senate. They also could call attention to the thrust of Johanns' proposal to move away from the basic commodity programs which deliver more money, in most years, to Nebraska's sprawling 3rd congressional district than to any other.

Speculation about a successor is rampant in Washington. Every handicapper's lead candidate is Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner, whom the president named acting secretary. Conner not only has all the requisite skills and experience but, as Johanns pointed out in his resignation letter, "has been intimately involved in the deliberations - from the development of our proposals to his attendance at virtually every hearing during the House markup. Few people are as knowledgeable and insightful about farm bill policy," Johanns said in the letter, which was dated yesterday.

Speculation that Conner's role in developing the administration's farm bill proposal would complicate his confirmation should be given little weight. The former Senate Agriculture Committee staffer enjoys almost unanimous respect on the committee despite any policy disagreement. Some have speculated that a recess appointment would avoid a time-consuming

confirmation process, and there's precedent for that. The late **President Ford** gave then-Deputy Secretary **John A. Knebel** a recess appointment after the resignation of Secretary **Earl L. Butz**.

Media mentions also include former House Agriculture Committee Chairman **Larry Combest**, R-Texas, and Under Secretaries **Thomas C. Dorr** (rural development) and **Mark E. Keenum** (farm and foreign agricultural service) but none has Conner's experience and background. The *Fort Wayne Journal Gazette* recalled last week that, when he was confirmed as deputy secretary in 2005, now-Chairman Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, of the Senate Agriculture Committee, said, "I just say that in the 20 years I have known Mr. Conner, Chuck Conner, I can say that he is an outstanding individual, someone I admire greatly, someone who knows agriculture, cares about rural America deeply."

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