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Meet the new nominee for Secretary of Agriculture

By Sara Wyant, Agri-Pulse Editor
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When word first spread that the White House was planning to nominate former North Dakota Governor Ed Schafer to be the next secretary of agriculture, **most lawmakers and lobbyists were surprised, if not shocked.**

The prevailing “wisdom” inside the Beltway was that Deputy Secretary Chuck Conner would continue to serve as Acting Secretary for the remaining 14 months of President George Bush’s term. Conner, who led the Senate Agriculture Committee’s staff for many years, guided a trade association, and served as the chief White House point person during the 2002 farm bill, is widely popular on Capitol Hill.



However, White House staff looked elsewhere, to a circle of folks who have exhibited strong leadership and business skills in other walks of life. And they **settled on a Republican who first became friends with Bush when he was governor of Texas.** In fact, sources close to Schafer say he was discussed as a potential nominee for Agriculture Secretary back when the President was first elected in 2000, but Ann Veneman from California was selected instead.

“Ed Schafer is the right choice to fill this post,” Bush said at a White House announcement. **“He was a leader on agricultural issues during his eight years as the governor of North Dakota.”**

So what can we expect from someone who **served as governor from 1992-2000 of one of our least populated, but important agricultural states?** Former employees who worked for the 61-year old Schafer while he was governor **describe him as a “team leader” who likes to empower his employees rather than micro-manage. Others say he’s “conscientious and considerate,” and “a good people person.”**

“From a personality standpoint, people will love him,” says one of his former advisors on agricultural issues. “He has an easy-going style that quickly puts folks at ease.” When in the governor’s office, Schafer insisted on being called simply, "Ed."

During his time as governor from 1992 to 2000, he directed the state response to eight disasters, including drought, flood and fires, according to a White House document. He also gained experience with grain and livestock import issues, serving as the lead on a trade mission to China in 2000, and launched a pilot project to revive rural communities by using technology to deliver education, healthcare and economic development. **Schafer was co-founder and co-chair of the Governors Biotechnology Partnership**, founded in 2000 to increase public understanding and support for the benefits of agricultural biotechnology.

Schafer honed his personal and business skills, working for his father, Harold Schafer, in the Gold Seal Co. --- the company his father founded in 1942. **The younger Schafer later become president of the household products company which made Mr. Bubble bubble bath, Glass Wax glass cleaner and other products.** It was sold in 1986.

His first statewide campaign in North Dakota was an unsuccessful GOP bid in 1990 to unseat then-U.S. Rep. Dorgan, where he captured only 35 percent of the vote. But just two years later, he was elected governor. His popularity grew while in office and he was re-elected in 1996. He chose not to run for a third term in 2000. Since then, he’s been involved in a variety of business interests. Most recently, Schafer served as CEO of Extend America, a wireless Internet access firm based in Bismarck, ND. The firm sold to Sprint in 2006.

Schafer resisted other GOP attempts to persuade him to run for office. He declined to seek the GOP nomination against Democrats Kent Conrad in 2006 and against Democratic Sen. Byron Dorgan in 2004. Some political pundits suggest that the GOP wanted to see Schafer named Secretary so he could gain better name recognition among today’s current voters and build a base to challenge Sen. Byron Dorgan in 2010.

However, sources close to Schafer say he has no interest in the Senate. **He much prefers the strong decision-making role he can play as a governor or in the executive branch,** rather than participating in the “sausage-making” sometimes required with the legislative process.

Schafer is expected to sail through confirmation in the Senate Agriculture Committee, where his former brother-in-law, Sen. Kent Conrad (D-ND), plays a prominent role. Conrad said he welcomed Schafer's nomination and hoped he would support the Senate farm legislation.

The bigger question is likely to be “when,” not “if,” he will be confirmed. The White House announced Schafer’s nomination just days before the Senate version of a new farm bill headed to the floor for debate and as USDA officials announced that they might

recommend a veto. Committee consideration is unlikely to occur until after the floor debate is completed.

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