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Farm leaders crave comfort and clout in new coalitions

By Sara Wyant

WASHINGTON, July 14, 2014 – When David Graves was hand-picked from Sen. Thad Cochran’s staff to lead the Rice Miller’s Association in 1989, the U.S. congressional map was not his “friend.”

The U.S. rice crop is primarily grown in just six states: Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas and a few counties in California. In 2013, rice was grown on only about 2.5 million acres, a relatively small crop compared to corn, for example, which was harvested from about 98 million acres.

At best, Graves could count on a dozen senators and even fewer representatives to fight for rice industry causes. That is, unless he could broaden the political base to include more people and more states.

The most likely solution: Connect those who sell the rice with those who grow the rice.

It’s a time-honored tradition to look for partners who can be aligned politically. In southern agricultural circles, the cotton industry had already figured out how to bring together all parts of their industry.

The National Cotton Council, established in 1938, serves as a forum for consensus-building among all parts of the supply chain: producers, ginners, warehousemen, merchants, cottonseed processors/dealers, cooperatives and textile manufacturers, both here and abroad. Although there are only about 8,900 cotton farms in the U.S., according to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, the Council has grown into one of the farm sector’s most powerful lobbying organizations.

But trying to make rice growers comfortable with other members of their supply chain in the late 1980s was like mixing oil and water, recalls Graves, now a lobbyist at McLeod, Watkinson & Miller in Washington, D.C.

The growers didn’t trust the millers and manufacturers. They complained about how little they got paid for the rice that would often sell – after it was processed and packaged – for dollars more when it was boxed, branded and stocked on grocery store shelves. Likewise, the millers



PACKING POLITICAL PUNCH IN RURAL AMERICA



didn't trust the growers to understand their cost structure and how much they invested in marketing.

Graves said it took plenty of hard-fought discussions and about two years to get everyone to agree that they needed each other to build stronger congressional support for their industry. Ultimately, all sides came together to create what is now the USA Rice Federation, an umbrella organization for producers, millers, the Rice Council and rice merchants. Graves served as the organization's first president and chief executive officer, from 1994-1997.

Like Graves, many agricultural and rural leaders are taking a hard look at the demographics in America and seeing fewer farms, fewer farmers and fewer rural congressional districts. Still, they remain convinced that this does not mean that farmers and ranchers will lose their political punch – if they can think differently about coalition building, political action committee (PAC) strategies, and communication efforts.

“There is absolutely no need for agriculture to lose one ounce of influence when it comes to producing food, feed, fuel and fiber,” says Graves. “As an industry, we are more valuable to the U.S. than 50 years ago and we can be even more valuable in the future.”

“But if your institution is so rigid that you fail to look at what’s happening around you, then you’ll lose. You can’t just continue doing what you are most comfortable with,” he adds.

“It’s all about comfort,” emphasizes Graves. “If people in agriculture can stay focused on their priorities and work with others, you can really expand your opportunities.”

Time to move out of the bunker?

Montana native Jon Doggett is now in his 27th year of advocating on behalf of agriculture in Washington, D.C., and currently serves as vice president of public policy for the National Corn Growers Association. Doggett is also concerned that many people in agricultural organizations are afraid to move out of their comfort zone and are “succumbing to a bunker mentality.”

When he talks to growers, he often hears defiant complaints about how urban and suburban folks “don’t understand agriculture” and “don’t know where their food comes from.”

“This mentality does the opposite of what we need to do,” explains Doggett. “We need to reach out to others and help understand their concerns. If we have our arms crossed against our chest, it won’t work.”

Doggett has been having discussions with his members about changes in U.S. demographics and how his organization needs to think differently about working with members of Congress.

“In 1960, there were eight members of the House of Representatives from Iowa and there were eight members from Florida. Now there are four from Iowa and 27 from Florida,” he adds.



Jon Doggett, VP of Public Policy
NCGA

Who is responsible? “Everyone in this room, plus Walt Disney and Fidel Castro,” he pointedly tells corn growers about Florida’s booming population, which increased from about 4.95 million in 1960 to almost 20 million in 2013.

Sometime in 2014, Florida will surpass New York in population, becoming the nation's third-most populous state, behind only California and Texas. And it is not only sun-seeking seniors driving the growth.

Florida is a haven for Latin American migrants and Northerners seeking work in the “Sunshine State.” Iowa may host the first-in-the-nation primary – giving voters there unparalleled influence on the primary process, but Florida’s 29 electoral votes are some of the nation’s most coveted during presidential elections.

Doggett says his grower members have been taking a hard look at demographic changes and are starting to understand that **“it’s not all about us. It’s about making sure that we are advocating for something that members want to deliver for their constituents.”**

“Our growers are all farming more land than they did in the 1960s. In agriculture, we’ve all been a victim of our own success,” he notes. **“But just as we’ve been innovative in moving from a 4020 John Deere tractor in the 1960s to modern day farm equipment, we have to be as innovative and adaptive in the political world.”**

Traditional partnerships splintered

Historically, farm groups have partnered with nutrition groups to advance both the “farm” and the “food and nutrition” portions of the farm bill – building on a partnership launched in the early 1970s when Senators Bob Dole, R-Kansas, and George McGovern, D-South Dakota., formed a coalition that was mutually beneficial to both urban and rural constituencies.

But that coalition has frayed in recent years – in part because so many lawmakers are focused like a laser beam on reducing the massive federal debt. And for conservative groups like the Heritage Foundation, Taxpayers for Common Sense and the Competitive Enterprise Institute (CEI), the farm bill became a “poster child” for what they viewed as wasteful federal spending. Even though the agricultural committees were the first to advance legislation which would help reduce the federal deficit, the farm bill was still projected to cost almost \$1 trillion dollars over 10 years.

Farm leaders may not look much differentbut Congress does

Many farm organizations are trying to recruit more diverse leaders, but few have been very successful. Since the 1980s, only a handful of women have served at the top of national farm and commodity organizations. For example, JoAnn Smith and Jan Lyons served as presidents of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association. Pam Johnson recently led the National Corn Growers Association and Vanessa Kummer served as chairwoman of the United Soybean Board.

At the same time, more and more females and other diverse candidates are running for office and winning. A record 102 women serve in the 113th Congress: 82 in the House (including three Delegates) and 20 in the Senate, according to the Congressional Research Service.

There are 42 African American Members of the House and two in the Senate. There are also a record 37 Hispanic or Latino Members serving: 33 in the House, including one Delegate and the Resident Commissioner, and four in the Senate. Thirteen Members (10 Representatives, two Delegates, and one Senator) are Asian American or Pacific Islanders. Two Native Americans serve in the House.

The dominant professions are public service, business and law, including 10 former governors, 33 former mayors and 100 former congressional staffers.

Only twenty-nine are farmers, ranchers or cattle farm owners.

As the farm bill debate brewed, so did enthusiasm for driving a wedge between farmers and the nutrition community.

Several of the most far-right legislators gathered each month on Capitol Hill for a Chick-fil-A lunch and “Conversations with Conservatives,” a Heritage Foundation event designed to highlight conservative causes. The farm bill was often a target of their wrath, with lawmakers like Rep. Tim Huelskamp, R-Kansas, reserving some of his most critical comments for the largest portion of the farm bill in terms of spending – the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Commonly known as food stamps, this portion of the new farm bill was expected to cost over \$760 billion.

As Heritage Action’s Dan Holler explained: “Senator Thad Cochran, R-Mississippi, the top Republican on the Senate Agriculture Committee, has called the Senate (farm) bill a ‘job creator.’”

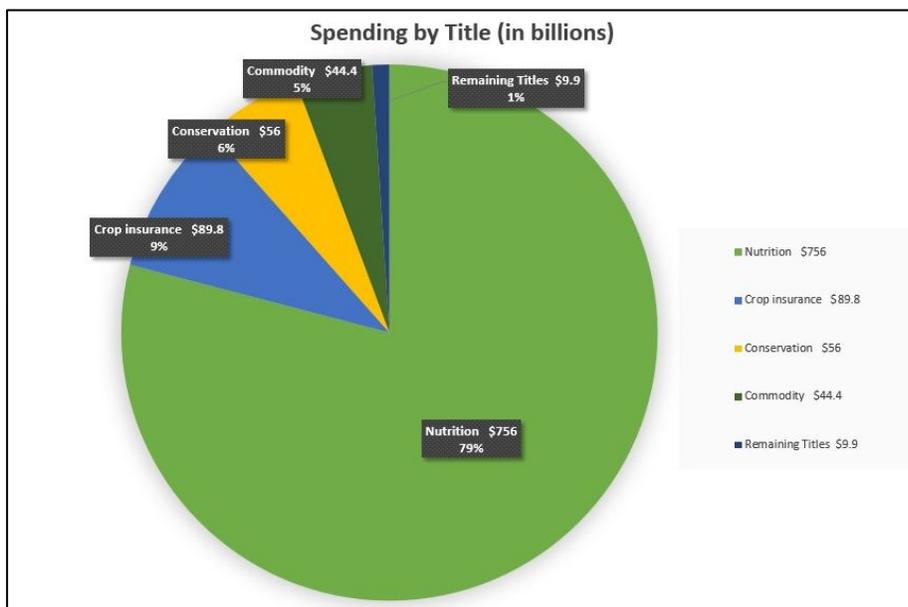
“Why are self-styled conservatives doing this?” asks Holler. “The answer is as simple as it is cynical. Cochran recently explained that ‘purely from a political perspective’ the inclusion of food stamps ‘helps get the farm bill passed.’”

“Cochran’s logic is not unique, but it is time to put this type of thinking out to pasture,” emphasizes Holler. “The inclusion of massive food stamp spending is one reason a five-year ‘farm bill’ was derailed last year, which therefore begs the question: Could \$80 billion in food stamp spending be reauthorized if farm subsidies weren’t?”

With backing from Heritage Action, lawmakers like Huelskamp wanted nothing short of \$40 billion in SNAP cuts over 10 years – even though the Senate was willing to cut only \$8 billion. Controversy over the proposed cuts and an amendment by Rep. Steve Southerland, R-Florida, that would have required able-bodied SNAP recipients to work or volunteer, helped bring the farm bill to its knees last year.

On June 20, 2013, farm leaders were stunned as the five-year measure failed on the House floor by 195-234, with 62 Republicans joining 172 Democrats to oppose the bill, and just 24

Democrats voting with 171 Republicans to approve it.



Later that evening, the farm bill defeat generated cheers and high-fives for the 1,000 or so business leaders and lawmakers attending the annual CEI fundraising dinner in Washington, where they had just raised \$1 million to continue their pork-fighting efforts.

Eventually, Rep. Marlin Stutzman, R-Ind., and others moved to break the long-held farm and nutrition alliance with a split-bill strategy. On July 12, 2013, Republicans managed to pass a slimmed down “agriculture only” bill through the House with a 216-208 vote – the first time food stamps were left out of a farm bill since 1973. On Sept. 20, 2013, the House voted 217-210 to pass the nutrition title of the farm bill as a stand-alone measure, while slashing billions of dollars from the food stamp program.

It’s not easy, but effective

The farm and nutrition alliance may not be dead, but the only way Congress is ever going to pass another farm bill is to figure out how to reach out to new people and bring new coalitions together, says former Rep. Dennis Cardoza, who now serves as co-chair of the public affairs practice of Foley & Lardner LLP in Washington. But he admits it’s not easy to encourage farmers to move outside their comfort zone.



Former Rep. Dennis Cardoza - CA

When he served on the House Agriculture Committee and helped craft the 2008 Farm Bill, Cardoza said he would frequently chastise some of the farmer leaders who traveled from his California district to lobby on the legislation.

“They would always come and talk to the same 30 members they always talked to. And I’d say, ‘Well, you know, we always vote with you. Don’t come talk to us. Go talk to the other folks who don’t know who a farmer is.’”

But the unspoken truth in many agricultural leadership circles is that working with people outside of so-called traditional agriculture – especially those who are younger or who come from more urban and ethnic backgrounds – does not always come easy for your “average” farmer who is a white, 58.3 year-old male.

“Some people in traditional agricultural organizations worry about these newbies,” admits former Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman, who now serves as co-chair of AGree. “The truth is, they can be very helpful.....serving as allies in a changing world.” AGree works to engage conventional organic and local farming interests – bringing together more new faces than have been brought together in the past, Glickman says.

“Organizations aren’t going to survive very long or be very successful if all they are doing is talking to the 35 members of Congress that are primarily representing rural districts,” says lobbyist Randy Russell, principal at the Russell Group.

He points to groups like the National Pork Producers Council – where leaders have been meeting with members of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Congressional Hispanic Caucus – as examples of organizations trying to reach out to other interest groups in an attempt to find common ground.

“It’s those kinds of new outreach efforts that have been very successful and will help the industry over the longer term. We’ve got to stop talking to ourselves,” Russell says.

“The rules of the game have changed,” adds Mike Torrey, principal and founder of Michael Torrey Associates. “Today, effective lobbying takes building alliances across industries and

party affiliations. **A single voice is not often heard, but a diverse coalition can elevate an issue and deliver real results. It's not easy, but it is effective."**

Both Cardoza and Glickman see opportunities for agricultural interests to partner with the academic community as well as conservation and environmental groups.

"The universities have been very concerned because they receive a lot of funding from the farm bill. Yet, as far as I know, they weren't really brought in as part of any farm bill coalition. That's a missed opportunity," Cardoza added.

When it comes to developing relationships between traditional agricultural groups and environmental and conservation groups, Glickman said it's still "a work in progress.

"Farmers are a particularly important part of preserving the land base. This is a partnership that's got great potential," he says.

Ducks and rifles to the rescue

The 2008 Farm Bill significantly expanded funding for the conservation title, bringing in much needed support from conservation organizations. For the most recent farm bill, farm groups found that they needed to expand the relationship even further to combat attacks on what they viewed as the most important part of the farm safety net: crop insurance.

The battle had been brewing for years. Organizations like the Environmental Working Group (EWG) – which became infamous in farm country for unveiling a database listing every farm program payment that any U.S. farmer had ever received – effectively built on what might seem like an unlikely set of allies – conservative critics of farm bill spending.

As members of Congress started shaping a new farm bill almost three years ago, it became clear that direct payments to farmers – which were paid regardless of whether or not a crop was planted – were no longer politically sustainable.

With direct payments out of the picture, EWG's next line of attack was crop insurance. The group tried, albeit unsuccessfully, to obtain information on every growers' crop insurance subsidy so they could publish the information. One of the group's goals was to limit premium subsidies and trim participation in crop insurance by capping the adjusted gross income (AGI) level for the nation's largest growers.

"Taxpayers currently subsidize an average of 62 percent of crop insurance premiums," noted EWG's Craig Cox. **"Shaving a few percentage points off these generous premium subsidies would save billions of dollars while retaining an ample safety net for farmers,"** he says.

In the Senate, there was already strong support for "means testing" on crop insurance subsidies. Senators Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, and Tom Coburn, R-Oklahoma, partnered on an AGI amendment that would reduce premium support on crop insurance by 15 percent for farmers with an AGI over \$750,000. It passed as an amendment during the first Senate farm bill vote in June 2012 by a large margin: 66-33.

If this amendment was included in the final farm bill, farm organizations feared that many of their members would be forced out of the program, making the rates much costlier for the remaining farmers and ultimately, making the program unsustainable.

It didn't take long for American Farm Bureau Federation's Senior Director of Congressional Relations Mary Kay Thatcher and former Natural Resources Conservation chief Bruce Knight – now a principal at Strategic Conservation Solutions – to launch a series of conversations with Dan Wrinn, the director of public policy for Ducks Unlimited (DU).

They had a mutual goal: maximizing the amount of conservation taking place on U.S. farmland. To address that goal, DU wanted farm organizations to support re-linking conservation compliance requirements to crop insurance. But that made some farmer leaders extremely nervous.

Between 1985 and 1996, the federal crop insurance program required farmers to meet conservation compliance standards before they qualified for subsidized premiums. However, the requirement was dropped in the 1996 farm bill in order to attract more participants. Conservation compliance was then tied to the direct payment subsidies to farmers that were initiated in the 1996 farm bill.

“We agreed to fight AGI if others would support conservation compliance with crop insurance,” noted Wrinn, who said that this was a change in perspective for his organization compared to 2002, when “we really angered a lot of our friends in agriculture.”

After realizing that direct payments and ties to conservation compliance would likely be gone in a new farm bill, **DU recognized that helping both large and small farmers would be key to their own mission of filling the skies with ducks and geese for future generations.** Crop insurance became the next logical connection to keeping conservation on the land.

But it wasn't an easy coalition to form and keep together.

“It wasn't really until Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow (D-Michigan) asked the groups to get moving that it all came together,” recalls Knight.

But as the coalition gained traction, it also attracted criticism. House Agriculture Committee Chairman Frank Lucas, R-Oklahoma, is no stranger to coalition building. But he opposed linking conservation compliance with crop insurance and his staff made it very clear that he did not approve of farm organizations lending their names to this effort. That push provided extra incentives for some farm organization leaders – who weren't sure they wanted to partner with the so-called “hook and bullet” groups to begin with – to stay away entirely. Over time, even the American Farm Bureau Federation pulled their support – citing the need to strictly follow its own policy book.

For his part, Wrinn had to deliver the bad news to a long-time ally – Durbin – explaining that his organization would be working against the senator's AGI amendment.

“Never would I have thought that I would be setting up Capitol Hill visits for corn and soybean farmers,” Wrinn told participants attending a crop insurance industry convention this spring.

“But DU wants to be that conservation group that has a relationship with ranchers, farmers and now with the crop insurance industry. This isn't a date, this is a marriage. We are in this for the long haul.”

Other farm and conservation organizations joined the coalition in support of linking conservation compliance to crop insurance and opposing the AGI amendment, including the National Corn Growers Association, the American Soybean Association, the National Cotton Council and the National Association of Conservation Districts. Even the National Wildlife Federation signed on.

Almost one year later, the Senate once again approved Durbin and Coburn's AGI amendment to the farm bill, but with slightly fewer votes. It passed by 59-33.

The coalition celebrated a much bigger victory during the House farm bill debate, when Wisconsin Rep. Ron Kind's amendment to means test crop insurance was narrowly defeated, 208-217.

“The success of the conservation compliance coalition was just one tiny example of what’s possible when you move out of your comfort zone,” noted David Graves, who lobbies on behalf of the crop insurance industry and convinced his members to stay engaged in the coalition. “We just need to keep learning and building coalitions.”

That was exactly the “take home” message delivered by Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman Debbie Stabenow when she addressed farm and crop insurance industry leaders earlier this year.

After the farm bill conference committee had completed its work and the House was poised to consider a final farm bill vote, Stabenow walked over to the lower chamber to watch members vote.



Sen. Debbie Stabenow,
Chairwoman Senate Ag
Committee

“In the end, we had over 350 conservation organizations that supported the farm bill, including the National Rifle Association (NRA) which endorsed the effort because of habitat for hunting,” Stabenow told *Agri-Pulse*. “I know that there were some Republican House members who changed their vote because of the NRA.”

Unlike last year's effort, the House approved the new farm bill, officially known as “The Agricultural Act of 2014” by a margin of 251-166 on Jan. 29, 2014.

Stabenow says she knows that there was a lot of concern at the beginning of this coalition, but “this is very, very important for the future.

“We ended direct payments, we put more money into crop insurance and we have critics out there now, just gunning for crop insurance.

“Because of this agreement, we were able to push back on some very damaging proposals for crop insurance,” she explained. **“But we wouldn’t have been able to do it without the broad coalition and understanding that we need to care about large farmers and large pieces of land as well as small farmers and small pieces of land.**

“Adding fruit and vegetable growers builds your coalition.....expanding to organic farmers builds your coalitionstrengthening whole farm policies for small farmers builds your coalition.....connecting with conservation groups builds your coalition....all of which will be absolutely critical going forward,” Stabenow adds.

Strategic Conservation Solutions founder Bruce Knight says, in many ways, this far-reaching coalition represents just the start of how those in agriculture and rural America can grow their influence.

“One of the real keys to watch is whether or not this coalition continues as one of convenience that is focused on just one issue or whether or not it will be a coalition about collaboration that can enable cooperation on several other issues,” says Knight.

For example, he says the American Petroleum Institute (API) desperately wants to bring conservation and wildlife groups into a coalition opposing the Renewable Fuel Standard (RFS).

Knight says that, thus far, many have not jumped on that bandwagon.

“That itself, is very significant and underscores the fact that there are tremendous gains to be made on other issues.”

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Next: Following the money behind agriculture’s influence