



News from NAFA

Congressman Hastings Talks Agriculture with NAFA

By Jon Dockter, NAFA Associate Director, and Rod Christensen, NAFA Executive Secretary

Representing a gigantic swath of central Washington, Congressman Doc Hastings is well familiar with agriculture since much of the state's estimated \$38 billion food and agriculture industry falls within the boundaries of his district. In fact, with more than 300 commodities produced commercially in Washington (everything from apples to wheat), an extensive knowledge of many issues, including farm policy, trade, research, and biotechnology just to name a few, is required if you intend to represent your constituents well.

Hastings studied at Central Washington University, ran his family's small business (Columbia Basin Paper and Supply), and served eight years in the Washington State Legislature before being elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1994 to serve Washington's 4th Congressional District. In the process, he has become well-versed in all things agriculture, particularly focusing on opening new markets and lowering unfair trade barriers in an effort to create jobs.

Recently, NAFA representatives visited with Congressman Hastings about some of the issues which are near and dear to his heart.

Trade. Hastings has a long record of support for the Market Access Program (MAP), used to open new markets for local farmers. He believes it is one of the keys to maintaining profitability and access to foreign markets for producers. Congressman Hastings was optimistic when asked about its prospects for continued funding. "We have strong bi-partisan and sectional support for MAP. The downside is the President has proposed a 20% cut and obviously that is something we are going to have to take into consideration. The Market Access Program has been proved effective since it was reformed in the late 90s because it is more crop specific than it was at that point. It is something we are going to have to work on." Hastings continued by saying, "Obviously, in a down economy more exports are a better way to approach getting us out of this recession. We're going to work very hard on this. Congress has supported it in the past and I am hopeful it will in the future."

Research. Hastings has also been instrumental in securing support for the Agricultural Research Service's Forage Crops Research Unit in Prosser, WA, of particular interest to alfalfa and alfalfa seed producers. But it is becoming increasingly difficult to make the case for ag research funding in light of the growing number of urban lawmakers who don't have an appreciation for its importance. "There is no question that American Agriculture has proved itself to be so efficient because there are fewer people in production agriculture than there were 100 years ago. It is the research dollars that have been spent that have allowed producers to produce more, better quality, and an ongoing education process is really what it is." Hastings added, "Research is extremely important, and we will continue to try to educate our colleagues in the urban areas and remind them that food comes from the working farms and not just from the grocery store."

Unfortunately, however, Hastings was not optimistic regarding the likelihood of near-term funding of the Alfalfa and Forage Research Program (AFRP), authorized in the 2008 Farm Bill. "The good

news is that it is an authorized program. The bad news is that it has not been funded and so that in itself is going to make it very difficult. Keep in mind our government, along with the President's proposal, is running huge deficits. And while this is a smaller program, and I think it falls broadly into the research area, it is going to be difficult to fund this year because there has to be priorities and probably the priorities will be those programs that are already in place and have been funded in the past."



Farm Bill. On the prospect that hearings will begin this year on the 2012 Farm Bill, Hastings was complimentary towards the House Agriculture Committee Chairman. "First of all, I congratulate Chairman Peterson for starting hearings presumably around the country early on. Chairman Goodlatte did that early on and that is where the specialty crop portion got into the Farm Bill." Considering the limited resources the Committee will have to work with given the current budget situation, Hastings expressed concern over the direction of the next Farm Bill stating, "It is hard to assess the farm aspect of the Farm Bill. Keep in mind that 75% or more of the Farm Bill doesn't go to farmers, it goes to food programs or other things. There may be a shift in the new Farm Bill, time will only tell but I am glad that the Chairman is having hearings across the country because I think that is an integral part of that, especially as it relates to farm programs and not to nutrition programs."

Climate Change. While climate change legislation has recently taken a back seat to health care, Congressman Hastings remains wary of its potential impact on agriculture. "Let's first brush everything aside and say what the climate change legislation is. It is nothing more than a tax on energy and I simply think this is the wrong time to tax energy, especially as it relates to production agriculture because so much energy is used to get crops in the field, to get them harvested, and get them to market that taxing energy at this time is simply bad policy. I am hopeful that that bill will not move in the Senate."

Biotechnology. Finally, the Congressman weighed in on biotechnology and the potential benefits it holds for production agriculture and society as a whole. "I think that these biotech type of crops are in our future. It simply makes sense to pursue that. Everything that I have seen has suggested that they are not harmful in the end to human health. So I think that we need to continue to pursue that because it will once again allow us to feed more and more people, probably without using other outside agents. And I think these sort of activities should be pursued." Commenting on the opposition to biotech products, Hastings added, "I honestly don't understand the reasons people oppose this because you end up getting products that are easier to work with and you don't have to use outside agents on them. It seems to me that in the long run this sort of research is a win-win situation."