

# Power in Political Pressure



*Public policy crafted in Washington D.C. has an effect on everyday agriculture.*

by **Bridget Beran**

In the world of agriculture, three-piece suits and conference rooms are far from the norm. However, people in suits and conference rooms are making decisions on what's best for agriculture, and that affects farmers and ranchers.

Public policy shaped in Washington, D.C., can have a major influence on the way cattlemen do business, from regulations to trade agreements.

"Decisions made in Washington affect us from the time we get up in the morning to the time we go to sleep at night and every moment in between," says Jim Strickland, chairman of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) political action committee (PAC). "We make up less than 2% of the population so it's vitally important that we speak up. It's imperative that we have folks (on our side) in Washington."

## **Speaking for agriculture**

The NCBA PAC serves as an advocate for beef producers across the U.S., from lobbying for agricultural policies to supporting candidates that will back agriculture. As the second-largest agriculture-based political action committee, Strickland says they utilized more than \$900,000 in the 2014 election cycle to support candidates who support the beef industry. This support sum is a big difference from the 2010 election when the PAC was only able to utilize \$280,000. Candidates backed by the NCBA PAC had a 93% success rate, including Elise Stefanik, a 30-year-old Republican from New York.

Stefanik, while not from a direct agriculture background, was highly supportive of agriculture. Since her recent election, Strickland says Stefanik has been touted as one of the prominent up-and-coming new politicians in D.C.

"We knew that she understood agriculture and wanted to help us," Strickland says. "We support Republicans and Democrats because agriculture is something that crosses party lines. We support those who are pro-ag and pro-ranching and willing to listen to us."

Each week the NCBA PAC hosts meet-and-greets and informational sessions to further educate members of Congress and their staffs about issues related to agriculture. For only \$500, those who donate have a plaque with the name of the operation placed on the "support wall" of

the NCBA office. For visiting politicians, the plaques highlight who is supporting the PAC from their home state.

There are more than 30,000 members of NCBA; however, the \$900,000 the PAC utilized in the last year was funded by just 1,700 members. If each member would give half of what those 1,700 donate, the PAC would have almost \$8 million to garner more support for agriculture and beef in Washington.

"There are more than 5,000 special interest groups lobbying in D.C. NCBA is the biggest organization representing livestock in Washington," Strickland says. "It takes money to keep people and get people elected. With more support we could have an even stronger and more respected voice."

## **Competing for the vote**

The strength of this voice is more and more necessary as regulations continue to strong-arm farmers and ranchers. The Waters of the United States Act (WOTUS) would affect up to 16,000 acres of farm ground in the state of Florida alone, and almost 50% of land could become regulated by the government. This legislation is just one of the policies the NCBA PAC is attempting to combat, along with the death tax and non-beef dietary guidelines.

"If we're going to survive, we have to continue to grow the awareness of politics and policy in our membership," Strickland says. "The decisions made in Washington aren't just going to affect my life; they're going to affect my children's lives and my grandchildren's lives. What they do now affects us 20 and 30 years from now."

One recent victory for NCBA was the reversal of Country of Origin Labeling (COOL). Costing more than \$1.3 billion, COOL indicated where the animal was born, raised and slaughtered.

"The increased costs of producing, processing and marketing food products to comply with COOL requirements without a commensurate measurable increase in consumer demands results in economic losses to producers, packers, retailers, and consumers and leads to a smaller overall industry with higher consumer prices and less product available," said Mike Conaway, U.S. House Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry chairman and Republican from Texas, in a floor statement.

After much pushback from Canada and Mexico, the third and second largest U.S. beef customers respectively, the policy was repealed in the House, opening up those dollars to be used in more productive sectors of agriculture. It is in consideration in the Senate.

“The large majority of farmers and ranchers oppose COOL, and I’m with them,” says Pat Roberts, U.S. Senator from Kansas and chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. “With impending retaliatory tariffs from Canada and Mexico — to the tune of billions of dollars — we must find a fix for COOL as soon as possible. I’m working hard on a solution with my colleagues on the Agriculture Committee and others in the Senate.”

Roberts says he and Conaway communicate regularly about issues combatting agriculture throughout the U.S. and that they are both committed to being champions for rural America.

“We are fighting burdensome regulations, conducting strong oversight and protecting the taxpayer and consumer,” Roberts says.

And they’re going into battle against some tough opponents. Strickland says the Humane Society of the United States is problem numbers one through 10. With 10 times as much funding, this organization is a hefty challenge for agriculture.

“Public policy and political activeness doesn’t end at your state line. What goes on in Washington has an impact from coast to coast,” Strickland says. “That’s why we pool our resources. We have to be prepared to put our best foot forward and fight for ranchers from the east to the west coast, every single day.”

#### Communication is key

Roberts urges concerned producers to get in touch with their local legislators, as well as the members of the House and Senate ag committees. He says legislators consider the thoughts and opinions of farmers and ranchers and the people that they represent to be of the utmost importance.

“Those are the folks I’m doing my best to promote and protect,” Roberts says. “I always enjoy hearing from the ‘boots on the ground’ in rural America. These folks feed and clothe the world, so what they have to say is important to me. The groups that represent hard-working farmers and ranchers are doing good work here in Washington, and rural America should be proud to have such strong voices representing them.”

Producers reaching out and building a relationship with their local legislator is also highly recommended by Strickland. He says that the more face time a politician has with an actual family farmer, the better his impression of agriculture and ranching will be. Though, he adds that some politicians won’t care about ranchers’ needs.

“One of the most trusted and respected vocations out there is ranching. More so than doctors or lawyers or anything, people trust that farmers and ranchers are good people,” Strickland says. “But folks in D.C. get elected with money and votes.”

Having a strong voice in Washington is of the utmost importance, according to Strickland, to make sure that policies are being shaped in a manner that benefits agriculture.

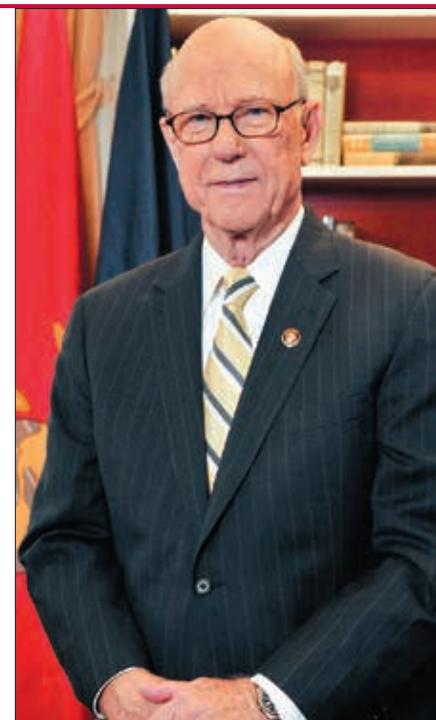
“We have to be there and be visible and be known as a group that can get active and make a difference and support people,” Strickland says. “When our lobbyists and our team walk into a room, I want them to be noticed and known. We have an election coming up that is going to be paramount to the future of our nation.”

Political activism is no longer just a job for lobbyists and politicians. It has now become a trickledown situation for every member of the industry to engage in, and it affects every aspect of the agriculture industry.

“We need to hear all viewpoints — particularly from agriculture,” Roberts says. “If farmers and ranchers don’t speak out, someone else sure will.” **HW**

**“The large majority of farmers and ranchers oppose COOL, and I’m with them. With impending retaliatory tariffs from Canada and Mexico — to the tune of billions of dollars — we must find a fix for COOL as soon as possible. I’m working hard on a solution with my colleagues on the Agriculture Committee and others in the Senate.”**

— U.S. Senator Pat Roberts



#### Top issues



**Jim Strickland**

While the list of issues facing the beef industry is forever growing, Jim Strickland, chairman of the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association political action committee highlights issues that are prominent in the political field.

**Country of Origin Labeling (COOL):** COOL was designed by activists and pushed on by a desire to show people where their food was raised. It forces stores to mark where meat was born, raised and processed. However, it directly violates the North America Trade Organization agreement and has caused tension with Canada and Mexico, the biggest importers of U.S. beef. It has not been found to change consumers’ habits in the type of beef they buy, and Canada and Mexico have complained that it encourages consumers to discriminate against their beef. It also costs more than \$1.3 billion in an already tight budget.

**Death Tax:** One major policy that is currently being combatted by agriculture lobbyists is the death tax. It places a tax on property that is inherited after the death of the original owner. This tax is especially problematic for family farmers due to the amount of money that is often involved in the land, equipment and livestock owned by a family farmer.

**Waters of the United States (WOTUS):** WOTUS features an expansion of the federal authority possessed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Army Corps of Engineers. In the proposed legislation, the EPA and the corps would have the authority to legislate all waters throughout the country, from lakes to the pond in a pasture. This expansion even includes ditch water and is an overreach of power. For more information, visit [congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1140](http://congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/1140). **HW**

