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.
“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.”