



Voice your Vote

Educator urges cattle producers to get involved in agricultural policy.

by *Chelsea Good*

There are three things that could derail the 2008 Farm Bill — the budget, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the complacency of American farmers and ranchers, Barry Flinchbaugh, professor of agricultural economics at Kansas State University (K-State), told attendees at the opening session of the Cattle Industry Summer Conference July 17.

“This is no time to be complacent,” Flinchbaugh warns. “It’s no time to be fat and happy.”

He says that the cattle industry has had some good times in America’s political history. It has enjoyed presidents who understood agriculture. George Washington was an extremely able farmer. Harry Truman was a Missouri farm boy. Dwight Eisenhower raised Angus cattle in Gettysburg, Pa. Lyndon Johnson hailed from the famous LBJ ranch. The Carter family made their money peanut farming, and Jimmy was very involved. Ronald Reagan had a California ranch he spent a lot of time on. President George W. Bush chops wood on his Texas ranch for entertainment. He says it relieves stress.

Flinchbaugh jokes that Bush must be chopping a lot of wood lately; but, his real

point is the cattle industry likely won’t be as fortunate when it comes to future presidents.

“We’re about to do something we haven’t done since 1952,” Flinchbaugh says. “That is enter into an election where no incumbent president or vice president is on either ticket. It leaves it wide open.” What Flinchbaugh sees is a slew of candidates who don’t understand agriculture. He says this makes the person the next president appoints as Secretary of Agriculture crucial.

Get involved

At this critical time in agricultural policy, Flinchbaugh says it’s of utmost importance that American farmers and ranchers get involved. He recognizes that many producers have ignored policy in the past. Instead, their sole focus was on ensuring they were the low-cost producer. It takes more than that now because agricultural policy affects the bottom line more every year, Flinchbaugh says.

“It’s no longer sufficient to be efficient,” he explains.

The times have changed, and today’s agricultural policy arena is very different than it was 40 years ago. Flinchbaugh

remarks that in 1968, foreign markets weren’t something producers needed to pay much attention to. That couldn’t be further from the truth today. Renewable fuel issues are another recent example. Today’s hot topic wasn’t even on the radar a few years ago. Immigration and environmental issues are also subjects that affect everyday farmers and ranchers.

“If a farmer or rancher doesn’t get involved, they’re going to have to live with what is done to them in ag policy,” Flinchbaugh says. He doesn’t see how anyone could sit back and let their neighbors make all the decisions.

Every vote counts

The excuse he understands the least is those ranchers who say their vote doesn’t matter. He says these producers just need to check the history books.

“Elections are like prices,” Flinchbaugh says. “They are determined on the margins.” The 1960, 1968, 1976 and 2000 presidential elections are great examples. Another election comes to Flinchbaugh’s mind. This one was in his home county of York, Pa.

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“If my dad had gone out and voted that day, a different person would have been in office,” he says.

Flinchbaugh is passionate about the difference each person can make. To him, this should mean more than farmers and ranchers showing up to mark their ballots on Nov. 4, 2008. He wants them to get out and voice their votes beforehand by talking to other producers as well as politicians about the issues that matter to them most.

He also says there is no substitute for a well-written letter sent to a politician from his or her home district.

Compromise is key

In closing, Flinchbaugh stressed the importance of farmers and ranchers working together toward a strong agricultural policy.

“We have the potential to build a Farm Bill that improves American agriculture,”

Flinchbaugh says. “But we’ve got to get our act together.”

Always a teacher, he left attendees at the summer conference with some advice on how to achieve this in life as well as the policy arena.

“Compromise is not a dirty word,” he says. “It’s how men and women live together in a civilized society.”

