

Will Our Next President Care About Farming?

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With less than six months remaining before U.S. voters select our next president, it has been remarkable to witness the lack of attention being paid by the remaining candidates to one of our country's most important assets: the ability to produce a safe and reliable domestic food supply.

There is much talk about how the candidates will address some issues that have obvious importance and priority: the war on terror; soaring fuel costs; health care, and the national economy. It is understandable why these topics are rightly getting the attention they deserve. But it is interesting and troubling to me to see how our potential national leaders are ignoring the other truly important questions that rightly should be raised to the level of national debate:

Where does agriculture fit in the United States?

Where does agriculture fit in providing fuel for the United States?

How come no one is talking about the importance of having a secure national food base?

What specifically can Congress and a new administration do to rehabilitate our failing and aging water and transportation infrastructure?

We all know that politicians are driven by the winds of the populace. Those seeking election will address the issues that they know matter to the people. While there seems to be sympathy for farmers on various levels, I am also beginning to observe that many people – especially those in urban areas – simply take affordable and safe food for granted. Could it be that we have reached a point in this country where most people just don't care about where their food comes from? Is that the reason for the public debate vacuum surrounding agriculture?

I pray that is not the case. That would indeed be scary.

The U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply, just as it needs a stable energy supply. The post 9/11 world of terrorist threats makes the stability of domestic food supply even more pressing. For farmers to survive; for food to be produced in America; a stable water supply must be available to grow food.

Farmers, ranchers and rural communities cannot solve the water supply problem created by the Western population boom. Nor can they be expected to sacrifice their livelihoods for the "greater good" of golf courses, strip malls and housing developments. Farmland is disappearing at a time when the U.S. needs a stable domestic food supply (just as it needs a stable energy supply). I am concerned that this critical issue – which

becomes even more serious when viewed in the context of projected climate-change impacts to water supplies - is being overlooked by our national leaders.

Modern, integrated water storage and distribution systems can provide tremendous physical and economic flexibility to address climate transformation and population growth. However, this flexibility is limited by legal, regulatory, or other institutional constraints, which can take longer to address than actually constructing the physical infrastructure. The often slow and cumbersome federal regulatory process is a major obstacle to realization of projects and actions that could enhance Western water supplies.

With the “water vs. growth” issue looming in the background, farmers who have always had responsibility for providing food and fiber are now also being asked to provide more fuel. There now are critical decisions to be made in that arena.

We have to have true national debate on the importance of producing our own food, fiber and fuel, before it is too late.

All of us need to tee up for the coming election by encouraging debate among the candidates on the future of agriculture, particularly irrigated farming. Our leaders must elevate the issue and debate the changing role for agriculture that has emerged as farmers have been asked to provide fuel as well as food, even as other voices question the worth of agriculture.

It is time for our national leaders to stand up and focus on improving the security, stability, and economic aspects of domestic food production so that our food remains readily available, ample, affordable, and safe.