

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

Reflections on the New Congress

By Lynne Finnerty

Millions of people from around the world visit our nation's capital each year. In January, about a hundred new lawmakers will arrive in Washington. They would be wise to do some sightseeing and pay attention to a few details for inspiration and guidance.

The reflecting pool on the north side of the capitol symbolizes the fact that the men and women we elect to Congress reflect all of us. We send them to Washington to enact laws that protect what people from coast to coast feel is most important to themselves, their businesses and the nation.

A year ago the reflecting pool was empty due to construction. When rainwater pooled there, it became stagnant and smelly. Some might say that this sad state of affairs was an apt reflection of a Congress that didn't always represent the people's priorities.

Farmers and ranchers certainly experienced this several times during the 111th Congress. The House passed a climate "cap and trade" bill that would make life more difficult and costly, while doing little if anything to curb climate change. Major emitters—and competitors—like China and India would not have had to cut their greenhouse gas emissions.

Extension of tax cuts to keep the economic recovery on a forward path was delayed. Congress didn't pass the tax cuts until after the election. Congress passed the health care reform bill despite concerns about how it would affect small businesses. Some lawmakers were pushing for the federal government to seize control from states over the regulation of nearly every pond, ditch or puddle. Meanwhile, the national debt grew, and grew.

Last November voters elected about 100 new members of Congress. Today, the reflecting pool is again filled with water. Is this an indication that the new Congress will truly reflect the people's wishes? Maybe. Maybe not. One can only hope.

The capitol grounds are a sylvan retreat in the middle of urban Washington, D.C. Planted with several species of tree, shrub and flower, the grounds could symbolize the abundance and diversity of our nation's agriculture. It's ironic then, that agriculture sometimes seems so far from lawmakers' minds.

Come January, at least nine new members of Congress will bring strong agricultural backgrounds that may inform their votes. Many others, though, will be greenhorns. They won't necessarily understand why we need a farm bill, or free trade agreements. Farmers and ranchers in their states and districts will need to let them know how legislation would affect them and the nation's food security.

The capitol is situated at the center of Washington, with the city's four quadrants radiating from it. Congress' actions radiate to every part of our nation. Whether you're a hipster buying bread in

New York City, a corn farmer in Nebraska or a cowboy driving beef on the hoof across Montana, legislation that affects our ability to produce food, fiber and fuel affects us all.

We all want the best for our country and a government that allows us to reach our fullest potential. Let's hope that the 112th Congress will reflect and advance our goals.