

The First 100 Days*By Lynne Finnerty*

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt took office in 1933, the United States was in an economic depression the likes of which had not been seen before and, thank goodness, hasn't been seen again since.

Roosevelt's first 100 days in office went by in such a flurry of activity to shore up the crippled banking system and provide relief to the millions of unemployed Americans, the "first 100 days" yardstick has been used ever since to see how each president measures up.

President Barack Obama has come to office during a time when the nation again faces big challenges. Plenty of newspapers have reviewed Obama's actions on everything from the economy to the war. Few, if any, have looked at Obama's first 100 days in office from an agriculture perspective. So, let's take a look.

On the positive side, although the economic stimulus package was controversial, it included funding for many construction projects benefiting rural areas, including those to rebuild locks and dams on the inland waterway system. It also included \$7.2 billion for expanding broadband Internet access to underserved areas, \$17 billion in tax incentives to encourage renewable energy usage and an extension of tax provisions that let farmers and ranchers write off more of their expenses sooner and improve their cash flow.

The president announced in April that he would ease U.S. restrictions on trade with and travel to Cuba, and AFBF applauded that move. Farm Bureau estimates farm exports to Cuba would more than double if strict financing rules also were lifted. The president has also stated his support for Congress finalizing trade agreements with Colombia, Panama and Korea.

On the debit side of the ledger is an attempt by the president in his 2010 budget proposal to end direct farm payments to those with \$500,000-plus in annual sales. A farm can have \$500,000 or more in sales and still not make a profit, particularly now when production costs are at historical highs. Congress wisely left this idea out of its budget resolution.

On the issue of taxes, the administration's budget supports allowing capital gains tax rates to rise to 20 percent, and for continuing the estate tax at current levels, rather than letting it expire. Both issues are particularly important to farmers and ranchers as small business operators.

Perhaps the thing that makes aggies the most nervous is the specter of costly new environmental regulations. The current Congress has only begun to work on a climate change bill, but EPA has gone ahead and issued a finding that greenhouse gases endanger the public's health and welfare, a move that could result in permitting fees on agricultural operations that they cannot afford.

Farmers will have to wait and see how the administration does on broader trade expansion and immigration reform, because we haven't seen detailed proposals on those issues. Obama vowed during his campaign to make immigration reform a priority if he became president. Additionally, health care reform, perhaps the administration's No. 1 priority, is awaiting action by Congress.

Any measure of the president's first 100 days should be tempered by the fact that there are many factors at play and he has to sync his agenda with that of Congress. The president has so much work to do, both domestically and internationally. Measures to keep taxes low, ensure that environmental regulations are science-based and don't kill economic activity, help farmers meet their labor needs and break down barriers to farm exports are all economic stimulus measures that are needed for agriculture and rural America.

Maybe those things could get done in the next 100 days.