

You can help make agricultural policy

LANCASTER — With the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 soon to expire, citizens and groups who care about the direction of our national food and farm policy will have a number of opportunities to make their views known, says Delaware extension community and resource economics specialist Gerald Vaughn.

The Congress will work on a replacement Act in 1981.

Much of the major food and agricultural policy is developed in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate. There are big differences in the way these two bodies view such legislation.

While all 100 senators have agricultural constituencies in their states, probably less than one-fourth of the House members have significant agricultural constituencies.

For the most part, a Congressman's voters are urban and more concerned about retail food prices, food quality, and food stamps than with farm prices and income. Thus it is possible for the Senate to pass bills highly favorable to farm producers, knowing full well that the House will alter such bills until they become more acceptable to urban consumers and the Administration.

Where does the public fit into the policymaking process? It's the voters, first of all, who decide who will represent them in Congress and as President. But with a clear understanding of the policymaking process, says Vaughn, private citizens can take a much broader role.

In the formal policymaking process, the executive branch (President and Secretary of Agriculture) may either develop its own legislative proposals or develop them in cooperation with the Congressional agricultural committees.

In either case, Congress narrows the decisions and drafts specific bills. Final approval by both houses sends the bill to the White House for the President's signature or veto.

When the Secretary of Agriculture develops proposals for the Administration, he is aided considerably by the research

staff of the USDA. The USDA staff may seek ideas and reactions at public hearings or from various organizations that have an interest in the subject. This is one point where citizens can have input into the process.

In Congress, agricultural and food policy is considered in the House Committee on Agriculture or the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry. The chairperson of the committee has a strong influence over the legislation.

The original drafting of the bill under the direction of the committee chairperson is a significant stage at which important ideas can enter the process.

Since staff members of the House and Senate committees are directly involved in drafting bills to be introduced, they have become perhaps the single most important access for citizens and organizations into the legislative process. Representatives and Senators depend very heavily on a committee staff's recommendations in the development of legislation, so getting to know key Congressional committee staffers may be at least as important as knowing the members of Congress themselves.

Staff members are always interested in gaining knowledge that will help them improve their recommendations to Congress, so they're usually very willing to listen to your views.

Members of Congress and their staffs also hear from many professional lobbyists who have an interest in food and agricultural policy issues. Lobbyists are generally considered reliable, well-informed sources of information about their areas of concern.

While lobbyists may well be biased in the direction of their interests, they can't overplay their hand without soon losing credibility and effectiveness. Thus, members of Congress often look to them for information.

Efforts of lobbyists to influence policy include testimony before Congressional committees, letters, direct contact with

the members of Congress and staff, phone calls, organizing letter writing campaigns by the members of their group, and participation in hearings called by executive departments.

But various farm lobbyists often work at cross purposes, since members of the farm organizations they represent have widely divergent views.

For example, established farmers who own their land free and clear are less inclined to push hard for direct price supports than those who have recently purchased land and have large payments to meet. Farm groups differ in their political philosophies, such as the degree of government involvement they want to see influencing their farming operations.

Different commodity groups sometimes have conflicting interests. For instance, grain producers want higher prices for their product, while livestock producers would like to see lower feed costs.

Thus, the Farm Bureau and the Grange may express positions that differ greatly from those of the National Farmers Union, National Farmers Organization, or the American Agricultural Movement. The diversity of views from the various producer groups may confuse some legislators and may give them considerable latitude in how they decide to vote.

Any member of the House or Senate may introduce a bill, but to get serious consideration it must be introduced by a committee member and usually must be favored by the chairperson.

After a bill is introduced it is referred to a committee for consideration. Both the Senate and House Agriculture Committees have subcommittees to which the chairperson may refer bills. The subcommittee may kill a bill, amend it, rewrite it, or combine it with other legislation.

Hearings are usually held in the subcommittees, sometimes around the nation

as well as in Washington, D.C. Hearings provide a public forum where witnesses can support, criticize or suggest changes. Seldom will hearings kill a bill, but they may lead to changes that will make it more acceptable and improve its chances for passage.

If you or your group wishes to oppose a piece of legislation, it's in your interest to find out where the sponsorship of the legislation originated and what is the motivation of the sponsoring group. By doing so it is quite often possible to attack legislation by pointing out someone's selfish interest in its passage.

After the hearings, committee members go to work on the markup process. They review each section of the bill, debate its merits, change wording and add amendments.

Most markup sessions are open to the public. Interested persons can see how the parts of the bill in which they have a major interest are handled and may respond to questions if asked by members of the committee.

This is an important point in the resolution of certain key issues.

After bills pass both House and Senate they must be made identical by a conference committee of the two bodies before going to the President for signature. The resulting compromise bill is then sent back to both Senate and House for final passage.

Trade-offs between rural and urban interests, between commodity groups and food assistance concerns, or between producers, industry and environmental groups, bring about the compromises resulting in bills that are finally approved by Congress and the Administration.

In a system of representative government, says Vaughn, each citizen has an opportunity to participate in the policymaking process. To have a voice in these decisions, keep informed about the issues.

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NEW HOLLAND FARMERS FAIR

OCT. 1, 2, 3, 4

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 1

"Spectacle of Bands" Parade — 7 P.M.

THURSDAY, OCT. 2

Baby Beef Judging 1:00 P.M. At ABC Groff lot on South Railroad Ave. Sale at the New Holland Sales Stables immediately after judging.

Tractor Driving Contest 6:30 P.M.

Fire Co. Tug-Of-War — 8 P.M.

FRIDAY, OCT. 3

Kids Day (After School)

Pet Parade — 7:30 P.M.

Tug of War — 8 P.M.

SATURDAY, OCT. 4

Baby Parade — 4 P.M.

Tug-Of-War Finals — 8 P.M.

RIDES & AMUSEMENTS

EXHIBITS ON

NORTH & SOUTH ROBERTS AVE.

Baby Beef and Pig Show — Earl' Sauders Parking Lot.

Corn and Grain — A.B.C. Groff Bldg.

Flower Show — Boy Scout Home on S. Roberts Ave.

Elementary School Auditorium — Fancy Work and Arts.

Food-Vegetables-Fruit-Canned and Baked Goods and Crafts — Basement of A.B.C. Groff Bldg.

Additional displays in various show windows.

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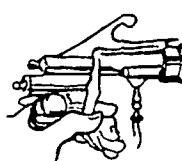
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