



Stenholm Shares Outlook on Congress, Administration

SEATTLE, January 11, 2010 – From health care to trade to animal welfare, a former member of Congress who spent 26 years on Capitol Hill shared his insights during a conference at the American Farm Bureau Federation's 91st annual meeting.

Health care reform is a must, according to former Rep. Charlie Stenholm (D-Texas), who served on the House Agriculture Committee throughout his career. He was the most senior Democrat on the panel for his final eight years as a member.

"If we're going to avoid a national calamity, something must be done. Period," he said.

But Congress has failed to tackle the real health care issue-restraining costs.

"We absolutely need tort reform, malpractice reform," Stenholm said.

Stenholm suggested that the same type of technology-based review of crop insurance that saved \$1.5 billion during his tenure in Congress also be applied to rooting out waste and abuse in health care programs.

"The folks who are cheating get caught," Stenholm said. "They should do that with health insurance."

However, even with cost-saving measures in place in the health care system, reform will come at a price.

"In terms of health care, we as a nation are demanding that money be spent, so revenue needs to be raised," he explained.

Also necessary is an energy policy with roles for both fossil fuels and biofuels.

"We're not going to replace oil and gas in the next 30 years, no matter how much we want to. We don't have the technology to do it," he said. "And we can't produce food without fossil fuels. Doesn't it make sense to develop that resource?"

However, fossil fuels won't last forever and that's why investment in the production of biofuels is so important.

Energy policy, according to Stenholm, is that it must be market oriented or else it will not be sustainable.

Further, Stenholm caution that the food vs. fuel debate was far from over, telling the group they're in "the energy business as well as the food business now."

Stenholm was hopeful that the Obama administration would take a greater interest in trade this year.

"We're in an international marketplace for agriculture," he said, calling the yet-to-be-finalized Colombia and Panama free trade agreements "no-brainers."

Also on the global front, Stenholm predicted that Bill Gates would be the Norman Borlaug of the 21st century. Gates' efforts to provide struggling people in Africa with the means to support themselves will benefit U.S. farmers, he said.

"It's a wise investment because sometime in the future, rather than taking our surplus, (African countries and their residents) will be buying our goods," he explained.

Stenholm also touched on animal welfare, urging the farmers and ranchers in the audience to lead their individual states in defining that issue for themselves and to "do it yesterday."

-30-

Contacts: Tracy Taylor Grondine Mace Thornton
(202) 316-6377 (540) 846-0263
tracyg@fb.org macet@fb.org