

The Politics of Agriculture: Get Involved, Don't Be Dissolved

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Introduction

The "politics of agriculture" drives our lives and manipulates our future, whether we know it or not, whether we care or not.

We have had several wake-up calls: the legislation that grew out of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", the Caribbean Basin Initiative, NAFTA.

Living with governmental change has been a pain for years and, though we have talked about it a lot, we've done little, and not enough. Government is steadily more and more in control of the ordinary things we do, the things we do going about our business of trying to grow citrus and sell it for enough to pay our bills and go on for another year.

The subject is much too complex to discuss well in these few minutes. but, to summarize, "We Florida citrus growers must take charge of, must get involved with our own political future or we are not likely to have much of a future".

Florida's citrus groves are part of a larger band of fruits and vegetable agriculture in what the USDA is beginning to refer to as "the Fruitful Rim". The states of the "Fruitful Rim" stretch westward from Florida through Texas to Florida, Arizona, New Mexico and California, even up to Washington.

Government, especially the USDA, sees that farm policy must be restructured and as part of their studies they are re-examining the geographic structure of American agriculture. Sadly, they may only now be learning about our part of agriculture.

The "Fruitful Rim" states are growers of fruits and vegetables: high value products, labor intensive, expensive in terms of inputs (be they labor, chemical or water) and subject to the threats of foreign, especially undeveloped country, competition. Importantly, they do not make major demands on the federal treasury for financial support. I read, recently in farm journal, a mainstream ag magazine, that federal payments now total over 40% of all farm income. and, we don't get any of it.

"Fruitful Rim" growers have cousins, other fruit and vegetable growers, scattered across the country. Their number and extent is striking. Some years ago, the twin magazines: American Fruit Grower and American Vegetable Grower printed maps of the country. Every county with commercial production of fruit, on the one hand or vegetables on the other was colored yellow. Both maps were nearly solid yellow.

There's some good and some bad. On the one hand there are everywhere farmers who understand some of our problems: chemicals, workers, etc. On the other, they mostly tend to be "switch hitters". They plant vegetables or small fruits, not as a career, but to

use land not available for use with program crops that year. Indeed, the question of whether a program crop farmer can keep his subsidy and *still* use his land to plant vegetables or fruits in competition with regular producers is a very contentious one.

Well, we citrus and other fruit and vegetable producers in the "Fruitful Rim" grew up and, except for the OJ tariff, developed our business without the aid or the hindrance of government.

That brings up some other vitally important points.

1. Oranges, and that means "juice", is far-and-away our biggest product. OJ was protected from its infancy by the 30c a pound tariff. The tariff was instituted before there was a juice industry and the juice industry would now be very different without it.
2. If, when, the tariff is taken from us, there will be lots of economic and social suffering.
3. Our growing domestic market is the world's most desirable. The US is large, rich, with a rapidly growing population. While other countries can top us in one of those characteristics. None can beat us on all.
4. Our second most important crop, grapefruit, benefits from our climate which seems to be the world's best for grapefruit.
5. Just now we are battling with an invasive exotic disease, canker, which threatens the future of grapefruit production and foreshadows more economic and social suffering.

On Our Own

The freezes, as far back as the 60's gave rise to foreign competition. "Silent Spring" spawned the environmental movement, the EPA and all of that. The cold war gave rise to a national program of support for the economies of developing nations. It was out of such simple things our present situation sprang.

Which is simply this:

1. We have a government which appears to see us as a proper sacrifice on the altar of free trade. Our protective tariff is being whittled away and there is no reason to believe it will survive the near future.
2. The agricultural chemical regulation system is not designed to be able to deal with our limited acreages or the, comparatively, small quantities of crops we grow.
3. The national system of labor regulation is not organized, or intended, to be able to supply the numbers of *legal* workers needed to harvest our crops.
4. The food supply channels seem willing and, maybe, able, to supply the national fruit and vegetable nutritional needs with imported foods and, so far at least, have avoided telling the consuming public of the substitution.
5. The system of excluding exotic pests from our national agriculture is breaking down. Not only are the inspections not catching the imports but our national system of

import controls is allowing more fruits and vegetables from localities with active infestations.

6. There is not, at present, a national concern with the prospects of fruit and vegetable growers.

If anyone doubts these facts, only remember the Lake County story. The freezes wiped out a citrus economy 2/3rds that of California and nobody cared.

Galen brown, the very knowledgeable director of the DOC mechanical harvesting research program, writes,

"I can predict the Council of Economic Advisors will regard Florida, California,..., and other horticultural crop states as responsible for the welfare of these commodities - not the federal government...."

Or two other illustrations:

1. The Bush administration, negotiating NAFTA, had it that the fruit and vegetable agriculture of the "Fruitful Rim" was *complementary*, not competitive, with the program crop agriculture of the north. The idea was the US shipped grains south and imported fruits and vegetables north to and from Mexico. Trade imbalance and the farm budgets were minimized. That there were two separate groups of farmers involved was ignored.
2. The environmental community negotiating national legislation re agricultural chemicals knows perfectly well the difference between the huge volumes used by the mono-crop growers in contrast to the small quantities used by the minor crop people. But, they do not want to concede a point, preferring to hold us hostage pending a complete settlement satisfactory to them.

A Needed Change

Clearly, continuation of our present ways of doing business means a slow downward spiral into a situation in which our lack of abilities to react to competitive threats will be fatal or nearly so. We need to rethink our position within the politics of agriculture.

Mike Stuart, exec of FFVA, in the Harvester magazine, recently wrote something like, "we, Florida citrus growers, need to decide what we need (from our federal government) from a program and policy standpoint."

Tom Stenzel, exec of United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Association, recently told the House Agriculture Committee, "...the fruit and vegetable sector is mired in a deepening crisis...prices for many produce crops are below the cost of production and increased federal regulation...is expected to result in losses..."

It is extremely important that all issues be laid on the table for consideration and appropriately acted on." That was part of a plea for inclusion of fruits and vegetables in the next Farm Bill, about which more later.

A Strategic Plan

We, Florida citrus growers need a plan, a shopping list of what we think government should do to allow us to stay in business, to be able to grow more and better fruit per acre than anywhere else in the world, and, since we cannot compete in harvesting the crop, what harvesting programs are needed to keep us competitive.

I think such a plan should consider the following elements:

1. What do we want to replace the tariff?
2. How we can deal with the possible loss of economic grapefruit production should the canker battle be lost?
3. What do we see as possible long, or short, term solutions to the dilemma between adequate numbers of harvest workers, the near crisis over illegal aliens, the problem of the inner cities and its numbers of unemployables?
4. What do we need to do to make mechanical harvesting a reality?
5. How can we inform consumers of where their fruits and vegetables come from?
6. What can be done to strengthen our defenses against exotic pest and disease imports? and where are the resources to deal with them after they are established?
7. Is there, can there be, a meaningful *tree* insurance program to protect growers confined to one location. Such a program would seem to be essential to any system which allowed young people, or new people, to get into the game.
8. Do we care about the survival of the small grower? Is there anything to be done to improve his survival chances? Do we care about the "citrus way of life and rural farm communities?
9. I'm sure there are more, but that will do for a start.

Grower Discussion

I think this implies a discussion, mostly among growers but, obviously, including others, especially packers, harvesters and community leaders. These are tied to the land and the people. These are the people whose decisions make the rural agricultural community possible.

Processors, handlers, on the other hand, represent a distribution stream. the source of their raw material and the location of their market is of little importance to them.

However, Jim Griffiths writes, "it may be useful to consider a western hemisphere OPEC for orange juice".

There isn't any machinery, any linkages, today, with which to have such a discussion. I don't see the associations as getting it done. Indeed, I will be greatly surprised if all the

associations embrace these ideas.

No, I think some new arrangements are needed. The most promising new player I see is the Citrus Commission. It hasn't any history, any baggage, to dump.

Before I make my next remarks, a little about myself. I started in this business 50 years ago as a working foreman in the days of hand labor. I have been an analyst, a grove caretaker and harvester. I have grown fruit on my Yalaha grove for 40 years. It was frozen out in the '80s and then I replanted. Arguably, I have more, unpaid, experience with the associations than any other living person. I have the experience to back up what I am about to say.

The associations need to change the ways they operate so that they can play their proper role in a new, forward looking, Florida citrus industry. Associations and their executives are not, really, organized to win. Instead, they are organized to deal with problems and to make sure their membership knows how well they have dealt with those problems.

Don't take this that I am saying as complaints about the associations. They are very good at what they do and they work hard at it. But, what they do is, for the most part, dealing with the immediate problems of the day and those, mostly, with the executive agencies and not with the Congress.

Other Crops and Other States

We should try to mesh our ideas with those of the other states of the "Fruitful Rim". They have similar problems and, together, represent over 25% of the votes in the US House.

An ecumenical movement has already begun. It started with elected state officials. Richard Kinney of Citrus Packers, reports that last year the Ag Commissioners of New Mexico, Florida, Arizona, California and Texas formed an alliance called NFACT. This organization will deal with common research, risk, and invasive pest problems. But, it can be used to coordinate and promote efforts to influence national policy to our benefit.

And, that ecumenical effort should be extended further. The Virginia farm bureau is feeling alienated from mid-western agriculture and wondering whether they might have more in common with a southeastern alliance.

And, Bob Crawford, our Commissioner of Agriculture has announced a five state blue crab marketing campaign (Florida around to Louisiana, I guess Georgia, Alabama and Mississippi don't have any blue crabs). They are developing a consumer identifier program (don't we wish we had "country of origin?") called USA American Blue Crab. Their foreign competition is Asia. Another case of lesser developed countries attempting to take advantage of the greatest consumer market in the world.

I have seen a letter from an association executive in which he describes differing crop

problems as being the obstacle barring greater inter-association cooperation.

I don't think so. Instead, I think it is different opinions and positions taken by the respective staffs and an unwillingness to "fall in" behind some one else.

Strategy versus Tactics

Tactics, I take it, are the steps taken to try to achieve the goals of strategy. Tactics can be legislative changes or negotiations with the administration, EPA, etc., trying to negotiate out of the traps legislation has set for us. these are the tasks our associations are active in and good at.

Basic Legislation Controlling Our Activities

These basic controls are scattered among several different pieces of legislation and federal agencies which, in turn, are supervised by several different committees which consider them on a periodic multi-year calendar.

EPA

Among them is the environmental protection agency (EPA). EPA's oversight is by the Commerce Committee. Central in EPA is the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide Regulatory Act (FIFRA) which came into effect several years ago.

About 5 years ago Congress passed the Food Quality Protection Act (FQPA) as a vehicle for re-evaluating the many chemicals we use in agriculture, our factories and shops and in our daily life at home. However, like so many other things, it has been found not so perfect. Studies have revealed the provisions of the act may result in the loss of enough vital chemicals to result in the loss of the eastern apple industry as well as do serious damage to many other agricultural operations.

Mary Hartney, exec, of Florida Fertilizer and Agrichemical Association and Dan Botts, chemical specialist for FFVA are working diligently trying to deal with EPA in these matters. others, notably Norm Nesheim of IFAS work a vehicle called the IRr-4 program intended to assist small users thread the regulatory maze imposed by EPA.

But, this is not enough. Steadily, chemical uses are being lost, mostly because manufacturers cannot, economically, justify the test demands made by EPA.

California Congressman, Pombo, has proposed a corrective measure, the Regulatory Fairness and Protection Act (RFPA)(HR1597). Florida Farm Bureau leads the way advocating this legislation and Pat Cockrell is their point man. Enough Congressmen have co-signed this bill (introduced in the spring of 1999) to pass it.

However, the chair of the House Commerce committee has refused to call the bill up for hearings. This, in itself, is an interesting story. The chairman is a Virginia man,

reportedly with agricultural interests. One story for his opposition is that he does not want this matter voted on prior to the election as the leadership fears it might give ammunition to the democratic party candidates. I'll come back to this subject a little later.

We need this bill. Not only will it represent the first whiff of reason into the chemical legislative process since the publication of "Silent Spring". It will also represent a joining together of many groups to pass a vigorously fought bill.

HR1597 must not be allowed to die with this Congress. It must come back after the elections and be backed to the hilt by Florida's citrus legislative coalition.

H-2A

Another of the basic laws directing our lives is that dealing with labor regulation. Nationally, most of agricultural work is done by immigrants, legal and illegal. The regulations governing this have become a nightmare, somewhat similar to the chemical ones given out by the EPA.

With the special encouragement of FFVA, supported by Florida Citrus Mutual, the same Mr. Pombo, a Californian and chair of the Fruit and Vegetable Sub-committee of the House Agricultural Committee, has introduced yet another corrective bill. It will reform the current H-2A guest worker laws to assure an adequate, legal work force for the next several years.

This bill's treatment is in sharp contrast to the EPA corrective one referred to earlier. It is before the House Immigration sub-committee of the Judiciary committee. But, this bill has the blessing of the House leadership. Even though it has only 29 co-sponsors it has already had a committee hearing and is expected to be brought to the floor for a vote this session.

The differences are striking. I make two guesses as to the reasons. First, I am sure the labor bill affects more groups than fruit and vegetable ones. More groups with an active and energetic program. Second, I doubt the environmental and consumer groups are opposed to this legislation. These run circles around us and tend to set our legislative agenda.

Country of Origin Legislation

I think country-of-origin labeling of fresh fruits, vegetables and other foods is vitally important. This consumer protection is given on processed products as well as foods sold in Florida and Maine. I cannot see how we American farmers can take advantage of the extra costs of growing the "American way". Neither can I see how the American people can find food grown with the security of the "American way" without that information.

The issue is before Congress, has been voted on and defeated by grocery stores and

handlers. it has had great support from Congressmen Karen Thurman of Inverness and Alan Boyd of Tallahassee. Unfortunately, the agricultural forces of all the states don't think it a necessity. Still, it isn't dead yet.

Political forces have put the consumer and environmental groups together on one side and the farmer-growers, chemical manufacturers and produce marketers on the other. an active and friendly press has succeeded in portraying unsophisticated farmer-growers as being "locked in" to a chemical based system of production by the chemical manufacturers and the USDA.

From being the men and women in the white hats we've allowed ourselves to be outfitted in black. Yet, this C of O issue clearly shows the inconsistency. Consumers and farmer-growers want a plentiful supply of wholesome fruits and vegetables at reasonable prices. Consumers and environmentalists and farmer-growers want a minimum of pesticide usage and residues and a maximum of assurance of the safety of their food.

Our task is to reposition ourselves with consumers and environmentalists as being the providers of the safest fruits and vegetables anywhere. We do this while at the same time providing work for tens of thousands. We need to tell the story that we provide organically grown produce for those who want it but we also use a limited amount of pesticides to provide an widely varied supply of low cost (in comparison) for those on a budget.

People get concerned when they learn that the part of our fruits and vegetables which is imported is growing steadily, which it is. They think they are entitled to have this imported produce, etc., labeled so they can know where their food comes from. People are not stupid, they can understand propaganda when it is pointed out to them.

And, we already know the grocery stores and chemical companies see us as the targets to be exploited.

Exotic Pests and Diseases

There is no issue more important or more complex than the issues related to the exclusion of exotic pests and diseases. These include keeping them out, paying for their eradication when they get in and paying the costs of learning to live with them when eradication fails. Charles Canady, of Lakeland, recently introduced, and got passed, a bill which increases the ability of APHIS to investigate and penalize infractions. But, there is much more to be done.

Challenge and Opportunity

The task, now, is to transform this active but uncoordinated and incomplete program into one dealing with a strategic challenge such as I described earlier. I don't believe our present activities, continued, will get the job done. Neither do I believe our now active organizations have it in them to restructure themselves, much as they need to.

No, something new is needed. I advocate the FCC/DOC taking a lead role in developing our strategy and showing the way to a broader, more coordinated effort. The FCC/DOC, with its financial strength, staff, and depth of state-wide (nearly) grower committees, councils, etc. is a sleeping giant. It is also a giant which has adopted Bob Rutledge's old mantra "If it's good for the grower, let's do it".

However, Bob Crawford should not be overlooked. In his years as Commissioner of Agriculture he has shown himself to be constantly on the lookout for ways to add to the security of Florida agriculture. If approached he would, surely, participate. Remember what I said about him and the blue crab industry and NFACT. Remember, too, he was the most active of the governmental operations defending us in the NAFTA matter.

Farm Bill

Ten or twelve years ago, when I was first introduced to Washington, I learned that fruit and vegetables, citrus, just was not their concern. I hadn't then, and only now, heard of the council of economic advisors, but I was aware of their conclusion.

I learned, then, the USDA had 14 task forces working on proposals for the 1990 bill. none of them were concerned with the fruit and vegetable situation. at that time a key department study on agricultural product import and export subsidies claimed to cover 90% of American agriculture but this study did not include fruits and/or vegetables.

Traditionally, the Farm Bill sets a general framework for international agricultural trade goals and has a principal purpose of increasing exports but it is full of provisions covering mainstream American agriculture.

New editions are monumental undertakings (remember the 14 task forces in 1990 and that left out fruits and vegetables, 30 or so percent of the business). the next one is due out in 2002 but the debate is beginning now.

It seemed to me inclusion in the Farm Bill would give fruits and vegetables a status as an essential part of American agriculture and the council of economic advisors could go hang.

Well, I'm proud to tell you the 1990 Farm Bill had a first, A Fruit And Vegetable Title, Title XIII. it didn't do a great deal, but, it set out the policy that domestic production of fruits and vegetables was a key part of American food policy. And, it acknowledged we producers were having difficulties and ordered a national study to determine what might be done. The associations of that time were not supportive and whatever study was made was never released.

Recently, Galen Brown wrote another interesting thing, "the Bergland (an earlier Secretary of Agriculture) Policy of 1979 states the federal government is not going to put

money into research projects that reduce the need for farm labor. That order still stands today". But, it seems to me Title XIII should have wiped that out????

The fruit and vegetable title idea wasn't supported and the next Farm Bill in 1996 didn't have a Title XIII.

Now is the time to get active and see about reviving a fruit and vegetable presence in the upcoming Farm Bill. Mike Stuart of FFVA and Tom Stenzel of UFFVA think so, too.

Stenzel puts it this way, " as Congress begins to examine how our present farm policy should be reviewed and modified in this new era of global markets, it is critical that ... solutions be considered that will help US agriculture remain world leaders in food production and competitiveness. Issues surrounding pest exclusion, disaster assistance, food safety, nutrition policy, retail trade practices, technology and research, international trade barriers and promotion, risk management tools, produce inspection activities and the current prohibition on flex acres are critical to the future viability of the fruit and vegetable industry".

We are not alone. But, there comes a time when the big brass ring is in reach, and, if we don't grab for it, it will be gone. The time will be past.

And I add, if there is not some basic change, there will not be permission for us to use our bought and paid for abscission chemical and without that, mechanical harvesting is a sometime thing. We, FCC/DOC are spending over \$1 million a year developing mechanical harvesting machinery. We have a fairly good abscission chemical, but cannot use it without changes in the way EPA treats new ag chemicals.

There is yet another consideration with this upcoming Farm Bill. The US, like all the other developed countries, is having great difficulty with the costs of its farm programs.

Incidentally, there are, supposedly aware, Congressmen who do not realize there is a major part of American agriculture which did not get government subsidies. When they learn the truth of this, they, typically, get much more interested in a pitch on behalf of Florida citrus and US fruits and vegetables.

Anyhow, back to the costs of farm programs. These costs have been financed in part by various trade protection methods (remember the Bush administration and "complementary"). But, that is becoming ever more difficult in these days of world trade organization. More and more, it seems, farm subsidies are going to have to come from taxes and that doesn't make any politician happy.

The Secretary of Agriculture is proposing changes in the national view of agriculture. As I understand his proposals they will not include the growers of fruits and vegetables who are still assumed to be able to take care of themselves.

Still more complex are the possible differences between a Farm Bill based on policies for

a market-oriented, internationally competitive agriculture (this is the kind we are familiar with) and one with policies for rural development and maintaining the traditional farm structure. The American farm bureau is vigorously making this distinction.

I think the latter position, rural development and the traditional farm structure deserves our closest attention because this is focused on "farms that may not fit the internationally competitive model and yet have much to contribute to production agriculture and the economy of rural areas". I have quoted from the AFBF ideas for the 2002 farm policy debate. This sounds like Lake County to me.

Public Relations

None of this is going to happen without some serious changes in many, maybe all of the human interrelationships concerned.

We growers must get more active and aware. After all, if we don't care, why should anyone else. If we don't care, why should our staff people go the extra mile or take chances with their careers?

There will have to be more money and more efficiency. Doing more means spending more, stopping some activities, or being more efficient. Certainly, duplications of all kind can be eliminated but, only if the law of ego can be controlled.

There are only a few sources of money. Grower tax money is an obvious one. Contributions are another. A prominent feature of the web sites of environmental groups is solicitations of contributions and instructions how to donate. There must be a definite effort to align ourselves with the growers of other states and crops, to align ourselves with related enterprises and worker groups. One of our biggest supporters in the NAFTA matter was a Chicago machine shop which made rolls for sugar cane plants. They knew where their business came from.

We even need to align ourselves with advocates of green space, who can understand the best alternative to urban sprawl is a healthy farm economy including growing fruits and vegetables.

A meeting was held several years ago. Congress has divided responsibility for agriculture between EPA, FDA, and USDA with USDA being in the lead. Working between them, one by one, is difficult. We, Florida, California and Texas, pooled our political muscle and convened a joint meeting of the fruit and vegetable associations of those states and the top people of the three agencies. We talked about common problems and determined in which agencies the solutions lay. The meeting was highly productive. If such were held annually, it would be invaluable.

Together, we have lots of muscle. But, without coordination, we are political spastics.

These things sound like bigger undertakings than they really are. I did most of them

during the few years I worked Washington. Starting from scratch, and learning as I went along, by the end of my efforts new linkages had been established that are still being used. I think I still see changes in the attitudes in USDA and the Congress that resulted. I know there is better access to the House Agriculture Committee and the White House.

Farmer-growers are apt to make better witnesses and advocates than association executives. but, we can't all go to Washington or Tallahassee. But, we can all be active in the public relationship campaign. We can write letters to editors and op-ed pieces. We can give civic club talks and preach to our Sunday School classes. We can visit our schools and invite the press to our groves.

Indeed, one of the most valuable services associations can, but don't often do, is to organize and motivate their membership into these kinds of activities. However, don't wait to be asked. It isn't required. This is a good place to lead into a new subject, the opportunities of the miracle of modern electronic technology--the Internet and its various services.

Scattered as we growers are it's difficult to keep in touch. With some exceptions and they are outstanding, there isn't much press, radio and tv coverage of "our" issues. Nancy Hardy and the Citrus Reporter and Gary Cooper of Southeast Agnet radio fame are two of these exceptions.

The Internet offers a great deal of help.

Most of our associations have web pages and most of them are open to everyone. Together, they have the potential of being developed into a computer-based citrus/fruit and vegetable/politics in agriculture information network. Again, new cooperation, new efficiency is needed. Overlap and duplication needs to be dumped and replaced with new content, including information on how to become active.

Here, again, is a field the FCC/DOC can be very useful in. Its web site is already excellent and could easily add material about citrus political matters. These could be transcripts of testimony, notices of meetings and hearings, reports of one kind or another. There could be lists of links to other sites, in and out of state, of groups working on the issues important to the future of our citrus interests.

An example of what can be done is the web site posted by the Environmental Defense Fund. I think this is the group which brought you the Alar scare. Their site is www.edf.org. Simple, don't you think? They will inform you of critical issues in the environmental world, give encouragement and education how to be an activist, even from your easy chair, and, not least, certainly, how to contribute money to advance the program of the fund. With only your zip code you can get information on what is wrong with the air, soil and water of your community. A good ag example is United Fresh Fruit and Vegetable's site.

For something completely different, a more complex, yet real, possibility is on-line

meetings of special interest groups. In such, several people could discuss some issue, maybe even come to a conclusion.

We have come together today and yesterday and talked of this and that. Maybe, hopefully, some ideas have started to gel. Yet, the weakness is, we will get into our vehicles and drive back to our day to day problems and this new excitement will fade away until the next time someone stands up and makes a harangue like this one.

There is a tremendous opportunity for leadership. Please, take on the responsibility for providing the leadership in your organization or in your corner of the world.

I will be always grateful for having the privilege of being a part of this Florida citrus growing adventure, especially during the glory years between 1950 and 1980. But, I am also grateful for having the opportunity to have you as my friends and associates.

Thank you for the opportunity of bringing these thoughts to this meeting.