

Ag must hold our new leaders' feet to the fire



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I am writing this month's column in the middle of inauguration week. Fortunately for me, I am traveling to Omaha and Charlotte to speak to NCAE member groups, and therefore am not caught up in the obligatory traffic, pedestrian, news and ideological gridlock that always ensues this week, no matter who is being inaugurated.

This year does pose some extra thought, extra challenges and, we hope, extra opportunities – but it is very different and relatively hard to predict.

Despite rural America being largely credited with electing President Trump, there was great concern over the fact that the secretary of agriculture designate was the last cabinet nomination. For some time, it appeared there were as many “leading candidates” as there are awards in a pre-school athletic event. There were several outstanding candidates, a few who, one presumed, were named as honorable mentions, and at least one who appeared to be openly campaigning for the role.

In the end, we may have come out in first place with Sonny Perdue. Perdue, former governor of Georgia, hails from a state where labor-intensive agriculture is recognized as a very important part of the overall economy, and who saw the damage done to his state by ill-informed, enforcement-only policies on immigration. He has a deep agricultural background, including having been part of an economically viable and sustainable agricultural business, and we expect he will respect the value of commercial-size and economically viable production businesses, as opposed to urban gardens and a vision of American food production being shifted to small farms that are barely more than subsistence operations. In short, we expect that his vision of successful and sustainable American agriculture will

include those of you who produce 80 percent of the produce, fiber, livestock and ornamentals necessary to feed and clothe America and the world.

We will continue to work to get USDA more involved in labor-intensive ag issues, and because of Perdue's background and connections to many leaders in labor-intensive agriculture, we are optimistic.

There is a majority in both houses of Congress and the White House, put there in large part by rural America.

On the Department of Labor side, nominee Andrew Puzder, although relatively unknown in our agricultural circles, does bring great promise. As the chief executive of a family of major fast-food restaurants, he has faced a similar set of labor, immigration and regulatory issues. The fact that he would be the first secretary of labor who has actually been the working CEO of a major employer – thus being responsible for the welfare, prosperity and sustainability of the employer and the employees – is another cause for optimism.

On our side – competing for a shrinking demographic of able, willing and available workers – we remain cautiously optimistic but very concerned with where cabinet members, the new president and other policy makers will take us in the realms of immigration policy, immigration enforcement, potential tariff wars and overall timing. Some of the nominees appear to be relatively one-dimensional and/or unprepared, but we will attempt to educate them with help from all of you.

We have a list of things that we believe the federal government could do, if willing, that would significantly strengthen America's labor-intensive agricultural industry while improving U.S. GDP and overall security. These actions include the following.

Offer business/agricultural employers at least a level playing field. Acknowledge the importance of a robust ag economy to the whole GDP, to America's moral place in the world and to America's security.

Recognize what “economically viable and sustainable” mean in agriculture (scale, productivity, economics, etc.) Base federal government decision making and regulation on the needs of those who actually produce 80 percent of our agricultural products.

Resist enforcement-only, knee-jerk options to pander to the base at the expense of America's long-term interests and agricultural sustainability. NCAE and a majority of our agricultural leaders will oppose mandatory E-Verify and other enforcement-only proposals that are not coupled with the necessary reforms and resources to assure a stable, able, predictable and sufficient agricultural work force.

Protect the interests of workers and employers.

Provide the proper and legal means for U.S. agriculture to continue to employ our current domestic workforce, including the 50 percent or more who are likely falsely documented.

Provide resources and the will/intent to make the current foreign-worker programs work as intended. Congress must be specific on what they intend these programs to do, prescriptive enough that they do not become political footballs with each new administration, and must include provisions to adequately fund their ongoing management. As part of this need, we continue to advocate that USDA have clear primacy and responsibility for agriculture programs.

Provide improved, market-driven, non-immigrant programs for the future that supply able, willing, available workers in the numbers required when they are required, reliably and predictably.

We must all work together to hold the feet of our elected officials to the fire to deliver these results. There is a majority in both houses of Congress and the White House, put there in large part by rural America. It is time for them to produce! **VGN**