



## CHANGES ON THE HORIZON FOR THE AG COMMITTEES

**By: T.A. Hawks**

Next year, new faces on the Ag Committees.

In two Committees unused to upheaval, there will be significant changes in leadership atop the House and Senate Agriculture Committees in the coming Congress. This will provide opportunities for new viewpoints from senior leaders on the Committee, but also is a time for ramping up staffing, leading to both friction and functional changes in how the Committees operate.

Longtime farm advocate Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS) retires at the end of this year, and his historic leadership of both the House and Senate Agriculture Committees and all the acquired knowledge of farm and nutrition policy leaves with him. Rep. Collin Peterson (D-MN), who has led Democrats on the House Agriculture Committee since 2005, will also be leaving, having lost his race for reelection. Rep. Mike Conaway's (R-TX) planned retirement from Congress, added to Peterson's loss, means that the House Agriculture Committee will have two new leaders in the incoming Congress.

Both the institutional knowledge and the skill of cobbling together alliances to pass farm bills and other important legislation under the Committees' jurisdiction depart with these members. Yet a deep bench on both Committees, and the work that Chairs and Ranking Members have undertaken to bring other members into the decision-making process, mean that there is much hope for the effectiveness of the Committee in 2021 and beyond, despite the broader partisan gridlock in Congress.

On the House side, there are serious contenders among House Democrats who want to serve as Chair and among House Republicans who can ably lead as Ranking Member; however, none have served in those roles previously. Members like Reps. David Scott (D-GA), Jim Costa (D-CA), GT Thompson (R-PA), Austin Scott (R-GA), and Rick Crawford (R-AR) all have combined decades of experience on the Committee, and whoever is chosen by their peers will provide new perspectives and experience that will inform their policy positions.

On the Senate side, where things are clearer on leadership of the Committee, Senator John Boozman (R-AR) has been a member of the Committee and a trusted ally of both Pat Roberts and Thad Cochran, the previous Republican leaders of the Committee. Boozman hails from Arkansas, a state with diverse row crops, significant animal production from cow-calf operations and poultry, a growing specialty crop industry, and timber. As such, Boozman understands the myriad interests within the Committee's jurisdiction, with constituents in all facets of the ag world. Furthermore, Boozman is a leader of the Senate Hunger Caucus and has a personal interest and legislative history in working on the needed renewal of the Child Nutrition Reauthorization. Boozman understands the need to work with school nutrition representatives and anti-hunger advocates alike to make programs function well for children, families, and urban and rural schools, as well as the broader need to address food insecurity

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through programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (known as “SNAP”) under the Committee’s jurisdiction.

Senator Boozman will be a good partner on the Committee for Senator Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), who is the one constant in a year of transition for the Agriculture Committees, and both have shown through their tenure in the Senate that they are members who want to legislate and find common ground when possible. Stabenow has brought focused attention on climate, specialty crops, needs of the hungry, and conservation in her time as Chair and Ranking Member. She and her staff are steeped in the policy and have a ten-year network of relationships that will be helpful as they deal with these and many more issues leading to the expiration of the current farm bill in 2023.

In addition to the policy issues mentioned, climate has taken on added gravity in agriculture. The call to balance farmers’ needs for additional revenue streams alongside the demands of consumers and consumer packaged goods companies will be key to developing both legislative ideas and solutions. Farmers are business people and need to see a benefit to undertake additional costs in the wake of years of historically low prices. When they see both environmental and profitability benefits, you can be sure they will be adopters of new practices. Threading that needle in the last few years with both producers and purchasers of their goods has been difficult and likely requires more discussion to find agreement on the government’s role in setting standards or guardrails to ensure adoption by producers.

And lastly, the Committee will be playing an active “advise and consent” role as the Biden Administration is being formed. All the nominees for USDA, Farm Credit Administration, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, and other boards submitted by the President will need to be processed by the Committee, which takes time and cooperation between Republicans and Democrats for the Executive Branch to function well.

2021 will certainly be a year of change for the leaders of congressional agriculture policy, but new partnerships and approaches provide opportunities for the advancement of creative partnerships to address food and farm policy, conservation, nutrition, and beyond.

### **T.A. Hawks**

A former senior Republican Senate staffer, T.A. knows what it takes to successfully navigate DC. Since arriving at Monument in 2015, he has helped clients understand the current political environment while providing expertise on appropriations, agriculture, nutrition, transportation and defense issues. Previously, T.A. worked for former Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Thad Cochran (R-MS) as the Republican Staff Director of the U.S. Senate Committee on Agriculture, where he helped develop, negotiate, and pass the five-year reauthorization of federal agriculture and nutrition assistance programs collectively known as the Farm Bill. T.A. previously held senior staff roles such as Chief of Staff and Legislative Director for Cochran when he was the senior Republican member of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He is a graduate of the University of Tennessee.

