

DEBBIE STABENOW V. BEN NELSON; CHERRY ORCHARDS V. CON AGRA

✘ This could be an interesting, beneficial outcome of this year's election: Debbie Stabenow ascending to Chair the Agriculture Committee.

As of his last calculation, Nate Silver gives the Democrats an 84% chance of keeping the Senate. But they'll keep it without Blanche Lincoln, whom Nate gives a 100% chance of losing to John Boozman. And that'll open up the Chairmanship on Ag.

The Politico reports that, in spite of the fact that four people have more seniority on the committee, Stabenow stands a decent chance of getting the post, though Ben Nelson might demand it as his reward for staying in the caucus.

Michigan's Debbie Stabenow is seen as the front-runner to replace Lincoln, but that's not a given. Nebraska moderate Ben Nelson might win the post as a consolation prize for staying in the Democratic Party, or Kent Conrad of North Dakota could abandon his budget chairmanship to take the helm.

[snip]

"Everybody in town seems to think that she is most likely going to be the next chairman," said one lobbyist who tracks the committee.

Sources close to the panel say the Michigan Democrat is well-liked by her colleagues and earned their respect during the last round of farm bill negotiations by bridging the interests of states with commodity crops and those with specialty fruit and vegetables.

But because Michigan isn't your typical

Big Ag state, some observers say Stabenow might face opposition from powerful industry lobbies. "There would probably be fear among some of the industry leaders of the cotton people and the wheat people and the barley people if they saw Stabenow take the helm," said an industry source close to the committee.

Now, Stabenow isn't always the most hardnosed leader. And on occasions (notably, the bankruptcy bill) she has put corporate interests ahead of her constituents.

But as the Politico article suggests, she would make a very interesting Ag Chair because of the nature of our Ag industry in MI. That's because MI's Ag industry has a diversity second only to CA, but (because of the scale) much less dominated by big players. Here's a snapshot:

- Michigan is the national leader in the production of tart cherries, having grown 196 million pounds or 77% of the U.S. total in 2007.
- Michigan also ranks first nationally for the production of pickling cucumbers, geraniums, petunias, squash and vegetable-type bedding plants.
- Michigan ranks 3rd in the nation in apple production with over 770 million bushels produced in 2007. The estimated farm-level value was \$97.1 million.
- Michigan is 2nd nationally

for beans, carrots, celery, plums and 3rd in asparagus production.

- Over 887,560 tons of fresh market and processing vegetables were grown in Michigan in 2007. The state ranks 8th in fresh market and 5th in processed vegetable production nationally.
- Michigan ranks 3rd nationally in value of wholesale sales of floriculture products.
- In 2007, Michigan led the nation in the value of sales for 13 crops, including: Potted Easter Lilies, Potted Spring Flowering Bulbs, Potted Geraniums (seed), Potted Petunias, Potted New Guinea Impatiens, New Guinea Impatiens Hanging Baskets, Geraniums, Impatiens, Begonia and Petunia Hanging Baskets, Impatiens and New Guinea Impatiens (flats) and Potted Geraniums (cuttings).
- About 335,000 dairy cows produced 7,598 million pounds of milk in 2007. Michigan ranks 7th nationally for milk production
- Michigan's hog production totaled 556 million pounds

in 2007. Michigan ranks
fourteenth in the
nation in terms of inventory.

- There were over 1 million head of cattle in the state in 2007 with an estimated value of \$1.42 billion.

(Somehow, that list neglected to mention blueberries, where we also lead the nation). MI farms are, on average, smaller than the national average, though they are more profitable per acre. There's a very healthy farmers market culture here, and also some proactive efforts to develop locally-branded processed food from our harvest, such as the soy processing plant 10 miles from here that offers a non-GMO soy oil. Our local big grocery chains do a pretty good job of promoting locally produced products.

And then there's Tony the Tiger, which is about as Big Ag culture as we get.

In other words, if Stabenow gets the Chair it'll put someone who is not beholden to Big Ag the way the Ag Chairmen typically are. At a time when the local Ag movement is picking up steam, we might have someone whose constituency would support such an effort.

Compare that with the most likely alternative: Ben Nelson. Who represents, among other corporations, Con Agra. As big as Big Ag gets.

Mind you, the decision may be made by the margin with which the Democrats keep the Senate. If we keep it by just two votes, I imagine we'll see Con Agra continue to rule. But if we can eke out a few more seats, it'll give Bad Nelson much less leverage to demand this Chairmanship.

(Cherry Orchard image by jsorbieus)