

Potential presidents talk ag issues

By HOLLY SPANGLER and PAM GOLDEN

AS the nation prepares to elect a new president next month, *Prairie Farmer* sought to travel beyond the sound bites on agricultural policy. The questions and answers below are relevant not only to farmer readers, but in many ways to the general public, as queries about ethanol, food vs. fuel, trade and farm subsidies continue to make headlines outside agricultural press.

With that in mind, the following set of questions were posed to both candidates, Sen. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama.

If elected president, the most recent farm bill won't expire in your term. Would you do anything in the next four years to address any problems you see with the current legislation?

Obama: It's important to implement the 2008 Farm Bill in keeping with the intent of Congress. The legislation is the product of more than 18 months of difficult negotiations that attempted to satisfy a complex set of competing priorities. If particular provisions are difficult to administer or present technical challenges to the Department of Agriculture, I will work with leaders from both parties in Congress and relevant stakeholders to make appropriate adjustments that are acceptable to the key stakeholders involved.

As president, I will work to ensure that the protections in the bill against gaming the system are properly enforced, and I will work with Congress to push for greater reform to

ensure that payments are targeted appropriately.

McCain: I support a risk-management program for farmers. When a farmer suffers from a natural disaster, such as droughts or floods, we should assist them. This is a commitment we have made to our farmers, and I will honor it. As president, I will fight on behalf of family farmers to enact reasonable reforms to our crop insurance program and our system of countercyclical and direct payments.

What are your views on the food vs. fuel debate?

Obama: Corn-based ethanol has been an important transitional technology in helping make America more energy independent. However, it has limitations and that's why I am committed to accelerating the transition to advanced biofuels. I support an array of policies to speed the transition away from corn and toward low-carbon, sustainable alternatives that do not rely on food crops.

It's important to remember that biofuels are all about security through diversification. There are many flavors of ethanol: different feedstocks, different production approaches, different carbon footprints. In contrast, there is only one flavor of oil: expensive, polluting and largely imported. As president, I will work to phase in at least 2 billion gallons of cellulosic ethanol into the national fuel supply by 2013.

McCain: Did not answer this question.

As president, what steps would you take to improve our renewable fuels policy?

Obama: I will focus my efforts in two key areas to:

■ Mandate all new vehicles are flexible-fuel vehicles. Sustainably produced biofuels



incentives and government contracts, into developing the most promising technologies and building the infrastructure to support them.

McCain: I believe alcohol-based fuels hold great promise as both an alternative to gasoline



can create jobs, protect the environment and help end oil addiction — but only if Americans drive cars that will take such fuels. I will work with Congress and auto companies to ensure that all new vehicles have FFV capability by the end of my first term in office.

■ Develop the next generation of sustainable biofuels and infrastructure. Advances in biofuels, including cellulosic ethanol, biobutenol and other new technologies that produce synthetic petroleum from sustainable feedstocks, offer tremendous potential to break our addiction to oil. I will work to ensure that these clean alternative fuels are developed and incorporated into our national supply as soon as possible. I will require at least 60 billion gallons of advanced biofuels by 2030. I will also invest federal resources, including tax

and as a means of expanding consumers' choices. Some choices such as ethanol are on the market right now. The second generation of alcohol-based fuels, like cellulosic ethanol, which won't compete with food crops, are showing great potential.

I support flex-fuel vehicles and believe they should play a greater role in our transportation sector. In just three years, Brazil went from new cars sales that were about 5% FFVs to over 70% of new vehicles that were FFVs. American automakers have committed to make 50% of their cars FFVs by 2012. I will call on automakers to make a more rapid and complete switch to FFVs.

If elected president, what would you do to enhance world market opportunities for U.S. farmers? What, if

any, trade agreements would you seek to push for approval or revisit as president?

Obama: Trade is vital to our agriculture sector. About 50% of the wheat, 20% of the corn and 35% of the soybeans we grow in the United States are exported.

These markets increase demand for our homegrown products and provide American farmers with additional revenue. Our farmers are among the most efficient in the world, and if given a level playing field, can compete effectively with anyone in the world.

There are several steps we must take to remain competitive and expand our access to markets. I support providing full funding to vital market promotion programs that enhance our access to important international markets. I have fought to break down trade and investment barriers that restrict our access to markets and will continue to do so. I supported bipartisan efforts to lift Korea's and Japan's bans on American beef.

It's also important that we ensure that our trade agreements create a level playing field for American businesses and workers, and that our farmers and businesses secure robust market access as a result of these agreements. Trade agreements must contain strong and enforceable labor and environmental standards so that American farmers are able to compete on a level playing field. I will also continue to support providing resources to research and technology that enhances the productivity and profitability of our farmers.

A snapshot of hot topics

SEN. John McCain and Sen. Barack Obama defined their positions on the following issues. Here are their answers, edited for space:

Ethanol

Obama: Supports policies that foster development of the biofuels industry. Proposes increasing the renewable fuels standard and investing in cellulosic ethanol.

McCain: Wants to "eliminate mandates, subsidies, tariffs and price supports that focus exclusively on corn-based ethanol and prevent the development of market-based

solutions, which would provide us with better options for our fuel needs."

Taxes

Obama: Supports a "reasonable estate tax policy that would effectively repeal the estate tax for 99.7% of estates." Wants to keep a 45% rate for the remaining 0.3% of estates with more than \$7 million per couple.

Plans to maintain current capital gains rate for those with incomes below \$250,000. Those in the top two income brackets would pay a new rate of 20%.

McCain: Wants to keep the top tax rate at 35%, maintain

the 15% rates on dividends and capital gains, and phase out the Alternative Minimum Tax. Also would cut the corporate tax rate from 35% to 25% and establish a permanent tax credit equal to 10% of wages spent on research and development.

Subsidies

Obama: Supported the 2008 Farm Bill; wants a safety net that "targets assistance appropriately."

McCain: Supports a risk-management program for farmers. Wants "reasonable reforms to our crop insurance program and our system of countercyclical and direct payments."

Believes "the current model

of legislating target prices for countercyclical payments does little to help farmers in a marketplace where the cost of inputs exceeds the target price schedules."

NAFTA

Obama: Wants to "fix NAFTA so that it works for American workers." Believes NAFTA was oversold and underperformed.

McCain: Did not answer.

Levee/dam repair

Obama: Believes that Washington has failed to upgrade and maintain the levee and dam system, calling it a "disgrace."

McCain: Did not answer.

McCain: I believe that globalization is an opportunity for American workers today and in the future. Ninety-five percent of the world's customers lie outside our borders, and we need to be at the table when the rules for access to those markets are written. To do so, the U.S. should engage in multilateral, regional and bilateral efforts to reduce barriers to trade, level the global playing field and build effective enforcement of global trading rules.

■ Read more about what the candidates have to say about fair trade, fertilizer prices and family farms at www.PrairieFarmer.com.