

Administration fails Southern ag

THE lady across the table from me didn't mean to be flippant — I don't think.

We had been chatting about the farm bill and that afternoon's speech by U.S. Ag Secretary Mike Johanns. In an effort to say something kind, I noted that my farmers had shown themselves to be true Southern gentlemen when they applauded politely at the end of the speech. She was stunned at the thought that cotton farmers don't appreciate

On My Mind

this administration's policies.

"Has there ever been an ag secretary that the South liked?" she asked.

Well ... Here I had to think fast to try again to be polite.

"We're glad he had sense enough to hire Gale Buchanan," I said. "He was our ag dean at the University of Georgia."

So then she asked, "Why doesn't the

South like Johanns?"

Durn. This conversation was taxing my manners.

"It's not a matter of whether we like Secretary Johanns," I started.

I talked a bit about policies, history and the differences between our primary crops and those of the nation's breadbasket — the north side of which is Johanns' backyard.

It's not that we don't like Johanns; it's that the policies proposed by the

administration are detrimental to our farmers — and therefore to our communities, our children, our quality of life and our future.

"But it's really not the secretary's fault," I said. "It's that ag policy historically has been based on Midwest agriculture." And, as Johanns himself said at that speech in New Orleans, "Every farm bill is really built on the shoulders of the last farm bill." The 2002 Farm Bill contained elements of the Freedom to Farm Bill. The 2007 Farm Bill will contain elements of the 2002 Farm Bill.

The question is: Which elements? Which leads to the other part of my answer about the South's view of Johanns: Southern ag is concerned that the secretary — who is supposed to speak for all of this country's farmers — addresses issues from a corn-centric base.

To be fair, it's a historical void, and he's not alone. Because our appointed ag leaders generally are more knowledgeable of the Corn Belt than the Cotton Belt, the farm bill largely could be based on the bullish ethanol economy now boosting corn growers to long-awaited economic heights.

In the meantime, peanut and cotton acres are expected to drop 20% in communities where the infrastructure doesn't exist to replace those acres with corn. Additionally, Brazil continues to attack the Cotton Program — and all of those folks securely seated in the Corn Belt don't see that what our international trade partners really want is to eliminate loan deficiency payments.

So while Johanns is in New Orleans telling cotton growers that he's making nice with other countries to protect their export market, the truth is he has cut his losses with cotton to maintain his popularity in the Corn Belt.

What happens, however, when the Corn Belt discovers the cotton volley was just the first skirmish in a war that targets U.S. agricultural policy as a whole and, most specifically, LDPs? An assault on LDPs strikes fear into the operations of every commodity crop producer in this country.

Yet Joe Outlaw, an economist with the Texas A&M Agriculture and Food Policy Center, an ag policy think tank that analyzes proposed policy for Congress, sees our LDPs as a primary target.

"The agriculture community really likes LDPs, which is what the rest of the world would like to do away with first."

When corn sold out cotton, our past was forgotten. So many others throughout history have been willing to give up their neighbor to protect themselves. But when we sell out our neighbor, we eventually discover the enemy at our door.

When the world comes after LDPs, whom then will the secretary sacrifice? And who then will wonder why the South doesn't like Johanns' proposed policies?

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OUT OF THE LAST 10 YEARS."**



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