



..... STRAIGHT FROM THE HORSES MOUTH

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There are so many things going on right now it is hard to concentrate on just one thing. The first thing that comes to mind to me however is the naming of a potential new Secretary of Agriculture within the new Presidential Cabinet. I had heard this candidate's name kicked around for a couple of weeks and it was finally announced. It should interest a lot of people involved in the agriculture industry because there is a lot of things that will be determined under his leadership. The person named to the position is former Georgia Governor, Sonny Perdue. We will hear a lot of stuff about all the candidates for Cabinet, and some will be political BS, but seldom do we hear the real qualifications or even the history of people who could eventually influence our very livelihood. We seldom know much about the actual candidates. Let's take a look at the possible Secretary of Agriculture in today's column. I will leave it up to you for your view of his qualifications and abilities.

If confirmed, Sonny Perdue would become the new head of vast bureaucracy of nearly 100,000 employees with a budget of around \$140 billion. The agency is charged with overseeing the large Farm Bill which includes the food stamp program, administering farm subsidies and shaping the nation's rural agenda. The Secretary of Agriculture serves as an important voice for rural Americans whose very livelihoods often depend on the success or failure of our ag community. Agriculture doesn't just put food on our tables – the USDA's role includes providing rural housing services, conducting research to expand our farmers' production capabilities, promoting American-grown products abroad, giving consumers confidence in our food supply and establishing effective safety nets for our producers. It is generally thought that Rural America, or what many called the "fly-over country", is what helped the President-Elect get elected. You would hope that the new-found political influence in our sector will help shape the legislation that will be forthcoming. He will have to hit the ground running as it is already time to start formulating the 2018 Farm Bill which certainly will have a lot of impact on our farmers and citizens.

If confirmed he would be the first agriculture secretary from a Southern state since Mike Espy of Mississippi headed the department in the early 1990s. I think this selection was the last because there was a lot of political posturing about the need to have a farmer, or particularly a person with ties to the Midwest as the new Secretary. I had heard there were very good people from the Midwest and even in Nebraska who would have been excellent and I am sure there still is concerns over his selection because of that. However we probably should learn a little more about him before we go too far off the path.

From what I could ascertain Perdue is a 70 year old veterinarian who basically decided to become a politician. Perdue was born Dec. 20, 1946 in Perry, GA. He is the son of a father who was a farmer and a mother who taught school. He attended the University of Georgia and was a walk-on on the school's football team. He earned a doctorate in veterinary medicine (DVM) from Georgia before volunteering for the Air Force in 1971. He left the military three years later and practiced as a veterinarian in Raleigh, N.C. for many years, before returning home to go into agribusiness in his home county. His company did well selling fertilizer and seed to farmers and buying their production for resale. His supporters say that he has agriculture in his DNA and that he intimately understands the needs of rural farmers and understands global aspects of agriculture.

Perdue spent 11 years in the Georgia State Senate, starting in 1990. During that time he helped craft the state's agriculture policy as a Democratic state senator from Houston County before switching to the GOP in 1998. In 2002 Perdue became the first Republican to be elected governor of Georgia since Reconstruction (130 years). One thing of note is that he oversaw Georgia's decades-long water dispute with Alabama and Florida and the state's response to an epic drought that prompted him to call for stiff water restrictions. I see this as a plus considering our own fight here in Nebraska with the Kansas-Nebraska-Colorado Republican River Compact conflict. I believe that water issues will be at the forefront in the years ahead.

Perdue has a deep religious faith that he brings to the job. Perdue and his wife Mary have four children, two boys and two girls. They have also occasionally served as foster parents for children awaiting adoption. As I understand it he resisted efforts to expand alcohol sales on Sunday in his state as Governor. I did remember something that I actually find refreshing about the man in that during the height of the drought throughout Georgia and surrounding states in 2007 when he joined with other state officials on the statehouse steps to lead a solemn prayer for rain that drew national headlines. Pray for rain!

Perdue focused on foreign trade in his pursuit of economic development for his state. With that in mind, he led trade delegations to China in 2008 and 2010. He actively created state offices for the State of Georgia in Hong Kong and Beijing for agricultural products while he was governor. He also led similar missions to Cuba and South America in 2010. All of these actions gave him a resume for International Trade and many contacts in those countries and beyond.

Since leaving politics Perdue has run a string of trucking, agriculture and logistics firms from his base in Middle Georgia. In 2011, Perdue and his cousin David Perdue, now a U.S. senator, formed a consulting firm, Perdue Partners, a commodities trade company that facilitates U.S. commerce. Perdue is also the managing member of AGrowstar, which purchases and stores corn, wheat and soybeans from farmers, then markets and sells the crops to processors. The company has about 3 million bushels of storage capacity at 11 sites in Georgia and South Carolina. It should also be mentioned that he served on the president-elect's agriculture advisory board which I am sure helped people see his attributes. With an emphasis on ag commodities, trade and in particular with China, you can see why he may have floated to the top of the candidate list.

The preceding information comes from the research and personal observations of the writer, which may or may not reflect the views of UNL or Nebraska Extension. For more further information on these or other topics contact D. A. Lienemann, Nebraska Extension Educator for Webster County in Red Cloud, (402) 746-3417 or email: dlienemann2@unl.edu or on the web at: <http://extension.unl.edu/statewide/webster>