

Communicating with Congress

Delegation delivers message in support of cooperative issues

A delegation of directors, managers, CEOs and various staff from cooperatives in Illinois made a trek to Washington D.C., May 1 – 4. I was a part of that delegation and it gave me pause to think of the many times I've been there in my life and the benefits from each trip.

The initial voyage was in 1972. My sister was a foreign exchange student and we drove her out to New York to the airport. Before we sent her on her way, we toured the capital as a family.

Since the mid-80s, I've been going to Washington D.C., not once but two or three times a year. As a young farmer I went as an Illinois Farm Bureau leader. Later, in my years as a legislator, I went to meet with members of Congress on issues related to Illinois. In the last five years, I've been going in a staff role to represent cooperative issues.

No matter how many times you go, you fly into Reagan National Airport and you look down to gaze upon the U.S. Capitol and the Washington, Jefferson and Lincoln monuments and you realize just how special that city really is.

As a representative for you, the delegation for Illinois goes as a part of a national legislative conference organized by the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association (NRECA). Joining us are representatives from 42 other states for a total of nearly 3,000 people converging on Washington to talk about rural electric cooperative issues.

Highlights this year included meeting with 12 members of Congress to express our concerns. We also met with the staff members who oversee energy issues in nine other Illinois Congressional offices.

There are some key legislative

focuses that we work on.

One of the issues is the Rural Utility Service loan program that provides low-interest financing to cooperatives to improve their services and upgrades to members. The loan level has been at \$6 billion for a very long time. Our focus is to ask Congress to maintain that funding level.

Again this year, one of the biggest concerns on capital hill is deficits and whether or not to raise the debt ceiling. Anything that puts budget pressure on the federal budget is scrutinized closely. One of those targeted is the Rural Utility Service (RUS) loan program.

Every year, literally since the Nixon administration, there is pressure to cut the program to half its funding or to eliminate it. That requires us to be persistent and make a very strong case for its benefits to our members. The money allows our cooperatives to build lines and infrastructure that keep costs low. With it we don't have to raise interest rates as much because of favorable financing.

We go to Washington to remind Congress that the RUS loan program – because it's a loan – actually returns interest to the government. We are not coming to them asking for a handout. We are actually asking Congress to continue to fund a program that actually earns \$100 million surplus. That always gets a smile or the nod of a head. It has a lot of bipartisan support.

The other big issue this year is coal combustion residuals, commonly called coal ash. We delivered a message in Washington to help Congressmen understand its benefits.

Southern Illinois Power Cooperative (SIPC) in Marion has

installed equipment, to the tune of \$15 million, which allows them to recycle this ash. Instead of just taking up room in landfills, we are able to convert that into a recyclable product such as roof shingle sand, sand-blasting abrasive, concrete manufacturing, fertilizers and a number of other products.

In our case, SIPC is recycling a large percent of that coal ash. In essence, if the EPA would determine that coal ash is a hazardous material and it couldn't be recycled, it would have to be handled in a hazardous fashion, increasing SIPC's cost of disposal by \$11 million. That is 25 percent of its fuel bill.

Our argument to the government is that there are 27 state EPAs, including the Illinois EPA, that have determined that coal ash is not a hazardous material. There is a beneficial reuse.

While the argument to recycle coal ash is well supported and received well, we are asking our members to co-sponsor a bill. A member can contact your members of Congress and ask them to support Bill H.R. 1391.

The argument makes sense. Why would we put ash in landfills when it can go into building materials? The message is fairly clear, it's just important that members of Congress hear this side of the story.

And that's why we keep going to Washington. It's so important for us to be there, championing our cause.

Duane Noland, President/CEO of the Association of Illinois Electric Cooperatives is a former state senator, active on his family farm near Blue Mound and a member of Shelby Electric Cooperative.

