

# POLITICO

## Stabenow, Nelson eyed for Ag post

Control over agriculture and farm policy in the Senate may soon fall to a Michigan Democrat or a Nebraskan whom leaders want to keep a Democrat.

With Sen. Blanche Lincoln facing a double-digit deficit in her reelection bid but Democrats favored to maintain control of the Senate, the Agriculture Committee is likely to be under new leadership come January.

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.

The vacancy is a prime opportunity for Midwestern lawmakers looking to gain political currency, especially with the possibility of a multibillion-dollar farm bill coming in 2012. The bill, which Congress renews every five years, will quite likely become a battleground over controversial policies like farm subsidies, efforts to boost domestic ethanol production and the Obama administration's environmental regulations.

Stabenow, who is up for reelection in 2012, would probably welcome the chance to gain some leadership credentials. She'd be the panel's fifth-most-senior Democrat if Lincoln loses, but the four lawmakers in front of her already hold powerful committees that they're unlikely to leave for the agriculture panel.

"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.

Democratic leadership could also skip Stabenow and use the spot as bait to keep Nelson from switching parties.

"If Republicans get within spitting distance, then it would be stunning if they didn't try to

convince Nelson and/or [Joe] Lieberman to switch,” said Norm Ornstein, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute.

“I actually think Nelson is a much more likely target, particularly because Nebraska is a place where having an ‘R’ after your name isn’t going to hurt you,” Ornstein added.

The chairmanship would be a “really big carrot for Democrats to hold in front of him that might keep him in the tent,” said Jennifer Duffy, who tracks the Senate for The Cook Political Report.

Still, Ornstein said he’s skeptical that Nelson would jump at any offer to switch parties. “I think Nelson would think long and hard before doing it,” he said. “There’s always a price to be paid.”

Nelson spokesman Jake Thompson sought to quash rumors that his boss might swap sides. “Sen. Nelson has no interest in changing parties,” Thompson told POLITICO. “He is and always will be an independent voice for Nebraska.”

The committee’s most senior Democrats aren’t expected to vie for the spot. Patrick Leahy of Vermont is chairman of the Judiciary Committee; Tom Harkin of Iowa gave up the Agriculture chairmanship to take the helm of the health panel when Sen. Ted Kennedy died; Conrad oversees the Budget Committee; and Max Baucus of Montana sits atop the powerful finance panel.

But Conrad might feel some pressure from his state’s massive agricultural interests to take the chairmanship.

“I think the senator would have a difficult choice,” said Robert Carlson, president of the North Dakota Farmers Union. “It would be fair to say there would be some pressure” to take the Ag Committee, he added, but North Dakotans also want to keep Conrad in charge of the powerful budget panel, which affects agriculture and a broader range of issues.

Democrats on Capitol Hill refuse to publicly discuss the possibility that Lincoln won’t be returning, and one Senate staffer said the gossip surrounding the committee is just that. “It’s all just speculation among staff at this point.”

But short of an Election Day miracle, Lincoln will get ousted from her Senate seat after just a year atop the agriculture panel. Republican John Boozman is trouncing her in the polls, and he’s maintained a comfortable double-digit lead for months.

“You hate to be too mean about it, but I do not see her coming back,” said Duffy.

If Republicans manage to wrest control of the Senate in November, Saxby Chambliss is seen as a shoo-in for the spot. The Georgia Republican was chairman of the panel from 2005 until 2007 and has been ranking member since then.