

Dateline Raleigh

The N.C. Farm Bureau — Preserving the Status Quo

by Ferrel Guillory

“Iron triangles” — informal interlockings of special interest lobbyists, congressional committees, and executive agency bureaucrats — operate as minigovernments within the federal government. Tobacco has its own “iron triangle,” and the most potent single entity on the lobbying side is the Raleigh-based North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation. For the past four years, the N.C. Farm Bureau has stood firm against major changes in the price support system sought by other farm and tobacco groups. In 1977, Congressman Walter Jones (D-N.C.), at the urging of farm bureaus in other Southeastern states, was prepared to introduce legislation to alter the tobacco price support scale. Alone, the Tar Heel Bureau opposed the legislation and, consequently, Jones dropped it. Now, the N.C. Bureau is again standing against prevailing opinion elsewhere that changes are needed. Other farm and tobacco groups, concerned over the glut of tobacco in storage under government loan and over American tobacco being priced out of world markets, have suggested changes in price support levels.

On May 1 of this year, the state bureau directors, by a unanimous vote, declined to join with the American Farm Bureau in endorsing a proposal to reduce tobacco price support increases by 50 to 65 percent. The opposition of the N.C. Bureau makes a substantial modification of support prices highly unlikely. “The North Carolina Farm Bureau generally makes tobacco policy,” says an aide to a North Carolina congressman.

The Bureau’s influence stems both from its broad base in North Carolina and from its access to key decision makers in Washington. Formed in 1936 in response to Depression conditions, the N.C. Farm Bureau has grown to a membership of more than 185,000, organized into chapters in all

100 counties. About 40 percent of its members have tobacco interests, but its members range from pork producers to soybean and cotton farmers. The group also offers “associate” memberships, so that about 20 percent of its members, according to Bureau estimates, are non-farmers. In addition to its lobbying, the Bureau operates a marketing service, publishes a monthly magazine, sells automobile, life, medical and farm insurance to its members, and offers them tires, batteries, anti-freeze, and lawn mowers at wholesale rates. While these services undoubtedly help the bureau attract and hold members, influencing farm policy remains its major *raison d’être*.

Since three-fourths of the nation’s flue-cured tobacco is grown in North Carolina, the voices of Tar Heel farmers are naturally going to get a hearing in Washington. And since the Farm Bureau has active members among each congressman’s constituents, its voice gets amplified on the second side of the triangle — the Congress. North Carolina lawmakers, to whom the Bureau has ready access, hold key positions on the committees that consider tobacco policy. Republican Jesse Helms is chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee. Democrat Charles Rose is chairman of the House Tobacco and Peanut Subcommittee, on which Reps. Charles Whitley and Walter Jones are also members.

To complete the triangle, the Farm Bureau also deals regularly with officials of the U.S. Department of Agriculture. When Helms took Agricul-

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ture Secretary John R. Block on a visit to North Carolina shortly after Block was appointed by President Reagan, one of their stops was the N.C. Farm Bureau's Raleigh headquarters, a modern building set among dogwoods and pines above Crabtree Valley shopping center. Bureau President John Sledge works with Department of Agriculture officials closely. "We're back and forth on the phone every day," he says.

The tobacco triangle functions to some extent in Raleigh as well, largely on tax and environmental issues. The Farm Bureau lobbies in the General Assembly and negotiates with the governor and other executive agencies. "When I lobbied here [in the General Assembly] I don't think we lost a single bill we were interested in," says James D. Speed, a former Farm Bureau lobbyist who is now a state senator from Franklin County.

At the Bureau's 1980 annual meeting, President Sledge clearly enunciated the group's bias. "Our right to farm is eroded whenever government steps in to make decisions for us," he said. "Our right to farm is injured when production needs, such as chemicals, are curtailed.... The right to farm is being challenged by labor unions, environmentalists, social scientists, and even some religious groups."

Critics of Farm Bureau positions question whether the group actually represents the genuine voices of farmers. In 1969, for example, then Gov. Bob Scott, whose father helped found the Grange in North Carolina, showed up at a Farm Bureau convention and chastised its leaders for placing its own advancement first and the welfare of rank-and-file farmers second. The Bureau fired back, accusing Scott of "abusing the dignity" of his office.

Recently, *The Flue-Cured Tobacco Farmer*, an independent magazine published in Raleigh by the Harvest Publishing Co., has given a forum to farmers seeking to form a new organization of growers. "We think the Farm Bureau is doing a good job," Lenoir County farmer Kenneth Jones was quoted as saying, "but we also think the tobacco grower needs an organization that represents only him.... It seemed to us that the man who actually drives the tractor isn't having much of a say." Editor Chris Bickers wrote that a "real problem is developing in the fact that so many of the people have a vested interest in maintaining the *status quo*.... It's my observation that non-producing quota holders are disproportionately represented in some of the traditional organizations...."

Sledge says the Farm Bureau will not stand in the way of growers trying to form another organization. Any strong voice for farmers is beneficial, Sledge says, but "we've seen these groups come and



John Sledge, president of the N.C. Farm Bureau

Photo courtesy of N.C. Farm Bureau

go." The Farm Bureau engages in a "pretty elaborate effort... to go to the grass roots," says Sledge, before taking a position on an issue. "The key to our total effort is to allow farmers to speak for themselves," he says, adding that the Bureau directors are "practicing farmers."

The Bureau remains opposed to change in the price support formula, says Sledge, because the escalation in tobacco prices has not been "out of proportion to the rate of inflation in this country" and some foreign buyers want American tobacco for its quality, regardless of price. It is an "unanswered question," says Sledge, whether lower price support levels would increase trade or "take away from the farmers and give it to the companies." Sledge insists that the vote to oppose the American Farm Bureau position was in part an effort by the N.C. Bureau to retain some flexibility for the future.

Within an "iron triangle," it is often easier to exercise a veto than to bring about a change. Since it often opposes any change, the N.C. Farm Bureau is at a strategic advantage. "Walter Jones, Charles Rose, and I have a veto power (on tobacco)," explains Rep. Whitley. "I think we could prevent a substantive change we oppose." And what the Farm Bureau opposes, these congressmen are likely to oppose, too. □