

# McConnell takes heat for tobacco aid plan

## He says critics embrace program that's doomed

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The Courier-Journal

In one of the biggest gambles of his political career, U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell has sounded retreat on a government program long considered sacrosanct in Kentucky — federal controls on growing tobacco.

McConnell's bombshell infuriated leaders of the state's leading tobacco-grower group, who predicted rural Kentucky voters will punish Republicans this fall for McConnell's abandonment of the tobacco price-support program in its time of peril.



Sen. Mitch McConnell cast himself as a political realist.

Rod Kuegel, president of Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association, said, "I think immediately there are repercussions for (Republican Jim) Bunning in the (Senate) race in the fall and, more long term, I think (McConnell's) willingness to deliver on a platter the tobacco farmer to Big Tobacco" could stop the GOP trend in Kentucky.

Democrats, who for years have been on the defensive on national issues in Kentucky, clearly sensed an opening.

All three of the major Democratic candidates for U.S. Senate excoriated McConnell yesterday and laid plans to keep hammering on the issue in the final week of their primary race.

Bunning, the 4th District congressman who is the GOP's presumptive nominee for the Senate, distanced himself from McConnell. In a brief statement, he pledged "to keep working for" retention of the price-support program.

Beyond the daily war of political words, however, there was a sense yesterday that McConnell had made a fateful decision.

In breaking with fellow lawmakers from the burley-growing belt, whom he characterized as "clinging" to a program that cannot be salvaged, McConnell insisted he was acting in Kentucky's interests.

Casting himself as a political realist and straight-shooter, McConnell said in an interview that a buyout is the best deal tobacco farmers can wheedle out of a hostile Congress. Farmers, he said, have no choice but to wave

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goodbye to the New Deal-era controls on production and price that have covered every tobacco crop in the United States since 1941.

Such "government-sanctioned and -controlled regimes" in agriculture have little popularity in the GOP-controlled Congress to begin with, McConnell said. And when the notoriety of tobacco is thrown into the mix, he said, it is "politically impossible to keep the program."

McConnell noted that a free-market approach to agriculture is being phased in for corn, wheat and feed grains. "You have to ask yourself, 'If there isn't a corn program, will there be a tobacco program?' I think the answer to that is no."

But U.S. Rep. Scotty Baesler, D-6th District, the only tobacco farmer in Congress and one of the Democrats seeking to replace retiring Sen. Wendell Ford, said McConnell's defeatism is a form of self-fulfilling prophecy.

"The only way we'd lose the program is if people in Kentucky say, 'It's gone, it's gone, it's gone,'" Baesler said.

**OTHER DEMOCRATS** noted that the federal government still controls production of milk, sugar and peanuts. No senator from a state dependent on those commodities has come out in favor of ending production controls, they said.

Baesler said McConnell's proposal to accept free-market production of tobacco would save cigarette companies \$1 billion a year, because the end of limits on production would cut prices about 75 cents a pound.

Cigarette manufacturers have been major "soft money" donors to Senate

Republicans' campaign committee, which McConnell heads. "I don't know if that's the connection or not," Baesler said, "but I can't see any other connection."

**TOBACCO** companies have favored Republicans this year in donations of soft money — large, essentially unregulated contributions to party committees.

But McConnell denied he's doing the cigarette makers' bidding or is motivated by partisan considerations.

"The price of tobacco is about, I think it's something like 3 percent of the price of a cigarette," he said.

The manufacturers like having a price-support program "because it gives them a large army of people with political clout that they wouldn't have if all the tobacco came from overseas," McConnell said.

"I've never heard anybody in the manufacturing community express an opinion on this subject. This has absolutely nothing to do with the manufacturers. They don't have a dog in this fight. . . . So, you know, any effort to stigmatize this as some kind of idea of the manufacturers cannot be proven. It cannot be proven because it's not true."

Critics said McConnell's approach — which would give growers buyout payments for three years, not stretched out over 10 years, as Ford has proposed — would work a hardship on rural communities.

"Developing a new kind of agriculture or an economic basis for the community . . . is something that will take 10 to 15 years," said John Berry Jr., former president and general counsel of the burley growers' co-op.

Berry noted that since 1992, the co-op has had a subsidiary that tries to

help create markets for farm products other than tobacco.

McConnell's proposal will cause family farms to disappear, said Karen Armstrong-Cummings, head of the subsidiary.

"It will fast-forward our remaining ag economy into contract hog and poultry production . . . and simply end rural areas as we know them," she wrote in an e-mail yesterday that urged farmers' allies to support Ford's proposal.

But McConnell said his proposal, which would send \$80,000, pretax, to the average grower in Kentucky, is the only recourse.

"It's the difference between getting \$80,000 over three years for the average grower, or potentially losing the program and getting nothing a few years down the road," he said.

**THE CO-OP'S** executive director, Danny McKinney, predicted that McConnell would live to regret his stance. "What he said was, 'It's dying, so I'm just going to go ahead and shoot it,'" McKinney said.

McConnell said the co-op's leaders are staunch Democrats.

"They believe that we should go down with the Titanic . . . all together, rather than providing lifeboats for people to survive," McConnell said.

But Kuegel, the co-op's president, said it's a strange world when health-advocacy groups that have bedeviled tobacco farmers in the past now support continued controls on production — as a way of keeping prices up and consumption down — and home-state lawmakers such as McConnell throw in the towel.

"I never dreamed all of this would happen," he said.