

# Senate candidates flay McConnell on tobacco

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Republicans and tobacco remained the main focus yesterday of Democrats running for the U.S. Senate.

Businessman Charlie Owen ran hardest on the issue, resurrecting Mitch McConnell's famous bloodhound theme to thrash the Republican senator for retreating on the federal tobacco price-support program.

Lt. Gov. Steve Henry talked tobacco and other issues in the Jackson Purchase, and U.S. Rep. Scotty Baesler cut short a planned campaign swing to return to Washington, saying he had to deal with tobacco and other hot topics in Congress.

But he started radio ads criticizing McConnell for endorsing a three-year buyout of tobacco farmers, after which production controls would end. Baesler's ad notes he is the only active tobacco farmer in Congress.

Owen flew to McConnell's offices around the state, where he was met by coonhounds and bloodhounds, a reference to the TV commercials that McConnell used to unseat Democrat Walter "Dee" Huddleston in 1984.

McConnell's TV hounds searched for a Huddleston who missed votes to make speeches for pay. Owen said his live dogs were searching for a "missing" senator who "is not fighting here for Kentucky's economic interests" but his own political future.

"I believe he's looking at a potential bid for the vice presidency," Owen said in Lexington. "He has in effect pushed the Kentucky small farmer off in the background."

Owen also noted that tobacco companies are major givers to Senate Republicans' campaign committee, which McConnell heads.

McConnell replied in a press release: "My only goal is to ensure that the average Kentucky tobacco quota grower receives an \$80,000 payment over the next three years."

Owen, Henry and Baesler favor Democratic Sen. Wendell Ford's plan for an optional buyout and keeping the price-support program.

Even before Owen and the dogs made their first stop, McConnell, who was in Washington, issued a release calling Owen "an East End Louisville dilettante (who) wouldn't recognize a tobacco patch if it weren't polled, analyzed and described to him by an army of paid political consultants."

Owen read the statement to reporters and said McConnell "is as accurate on that as he is on farm policy."

Owen said he helped his mother's family raise tobacco "every summer" when he was young, still manages her crop of 3½ acres, and that the

grading system for burley tobacco "was begun by my uncle, Zed Layson, of Millersburg" (in Bourbon County). He said his mother's income from tobacco put him through Princeton University and the University of Virginia law school.

Owen said the end of price support would drop burley prices by a third, putting half the state's small farms out of business. Even with a buyout, he said, "the value of your farm has been reduced by as much as your buyout, so the farmer has gained very little. Kentucky has lost a lot."

He added: "We need an agricultural policy that will support small farms instead of just large operations."

Asked what McConnell's stand has to do with the Democratic primary, Owen said he wants voters to see that he is independent of special interests, "can be the best spokesman for Kentucky's farmers" and "can best carry this election to the Republicans in the fall." Owen said the presumptive Republican nominee, Rep. Jim Bunning, has been "anointed" by McConnell. (Bunning has said he hopes to keep price support.)

Baesler spokesman John Townsend called Owen's use of dogs "innovative" but added: "In spite of that, he still has no credentials on tobacco."

Henry talked less about tobacco yesterday, but he plans to start running a radio commercial today in which prominent farmer William Kuegel criticizes McConnell's stand and touts Henry as a fighter for tobacco in the mold of Ford.

Outside a Paducah Rotary Club meeting, where he shook hands but didn't get to make a speech, Henry said McConnell's move "really gives the wrong message to the rest of the country" and destroys needed unity on the issue in Kentucky's congressional delegation.

On other farm issues, Henry said in a radio interview in Benton that he supported most of Gov. Paul Patton's swine regulations but that Kentucky must curtail development around small cities because "we're tilling up and developing too much farmland."

He also said state and federal vehicles should be required to use corn-based ethanol fuel.

At the McCracken County Senior Citizens' Center, Henry criticized Congress for favoring managed-care restrictions on Medicare, which he said could force some patients to give up their long-time physicians and hospitals.

Henry's message pleased Wilma Shankle of Paducah, who said, "I hadn't paid too much attention, but what he said here made a difference for me."