

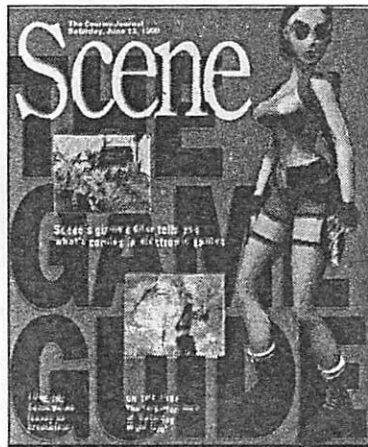
The Courier-Journal

68 PAGES • A GANNETT NEWSPAPER

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY

SATURDAY, JUNE 13, 1998 • 50 CENTS

METRO
EDITION



Tobacco-farmer survey called unscientific

Results showed support for buyout backed by McConnell

By JAMES R. CARROLL
The Courier-Journal

WASHINGTON — A survey of tobacco farmers that Kentucky Sen. Mitch McConnell has cited as evidence of support for his buyout plan for growers is seriously flawed, according to polling experts.

The survey was done by the Tobacco Fairness Coalition, a lobbying group headed by North Carolina farmers who stand to benefit more from a buyout than most in Kentucky, where the average grower produces much less tobacco.

McConnell has claimed — most recently in an article published this week in several Kentucky newspapers — that the survey shows that 63 percent of burley tobacco growers in Kentucky and Tennessee support an end to the tobacco price-support program and a three-year buyout that pays farmers \$8 per pound.

WAITING: Sponsors of plans to aid tobacco farmers aren't sure when Senate debate will start. **A5**

But in interviews, independent pollsters said the coalition did not follow commonly accepted methods of polling and that the results cannot be said to represent the views of Kentucky farmers.

"It definitely is not scientific in any sense," said Marc Maynard, assistant director of the Roper Center for Pub-

lic Opinion Research at the University of Connecticut.

The experts pointed to several problems with the survey, which was mailed to about 15,000 burley growers: It was accompanied by a letter stating the coalition's pro-buyout position and asking for financial support, and only about 1,000 farmers returned the survey, a rate of response that is too low to provide reliable results, the pollsters said.

"What you've got is non-represen-

See SURVEY
Page 5, col. 1, this section



Sen. Mitch McConnell, left, has proposed eliminating the tobacco price-support program and offering a three-year buyout for farmers. His spokesman defended the use of the survey yesterday.

Aid for tobacco farmers still up in air

Sponsors unsure when they'll present competing proposals

By JAMES R. CARROLL
The Courier-Journal

WASHINGTON — After voting on an amendment to the comprehensive tobacco bill Thursday, Sen. Richard Lugar lingered on the Senate floor, looking for a sign that after three weeks of waiting, it was time for him to bring up his plan for helping tobacco farmers.

The only sign he found pointed to more waiting: Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., was recognized to begin debate on his amendment, to be followed by another amendment from Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas. That would launch the Senate well into Monday evening, possibly Tuesday.

Lugar, poised with his notebooks and charts, is getting frustrated.

"I'm all dressed up with no place to go," the Indiana Republican joked in an interview yesterday.

Indeed, the same could be said for Sen. Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., who will help Lugar with his amendment, and Sen. Wendell Ford, D-Ky., who, with Sen. Ernest Hollings, D-S.C., has a competing proposal.

"I'm about as ready as I can be," Ford said. "Sometimes you get over-ready."



Sen. Wendell Ford said he'll tie up the tobacco bill with amendments if his plan loses. "I'm a poor loser and I'm going to fight for my farmers."



"I'm all dressed up with no place to go," Sen. Richard Lugar joked yesterday about waiting to offer an amendment on helping tobacco farmers.

When the battle over the tobacco farmers will be joined is anybody's guess. The fact that Lugar, chairman of the Senate Agriculture Committee, hasn't a clue is evidence of the extremely fluid atmosphere in which the tobacco bill sponsored by Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., is being debated by the Senate.

Amendments dealing with tobacco farmers could see debate early next week, but also could be pushed back if senators first tackle other outstanding issues. Those range from changing the so-called "lookback" penalties against the tobacco industry for failing to meet targets for reducing underage smoking, to proposals to substitute the year-old national tobacco settlement for the entire McCain bill.

What to do about the nation's tobacco farmers remains one of the key unresolved issues. Many senators agree it looms as a potential barrier to the bill's survival.

Lugar and McConnell have pro-

posed elimination of the tobacco price-support program and a three-year buyout of all tobacco farmers. That buyout would consist of transition payments of \$8 per pound for quota holders and \$4 per pound for tenants and lessees. After the end of the program, farmers still could grow tobacco but would be subject to the price swings of the international market. The Lugar-McConnell plan would cost \$18 billion over three years.

Ford wants to preserve price supports and give farmers the option of buyouts, to be paid over 10 years. Those who took the buyout would be barred from growing tobacco for 25 years. His plan would cost \$28 billion over 10 years.

Both plans include money for economic assistance to tobacco-dependent communities.

Last month Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., inserted the Lugar-McConnell proposal into the tobacco bill alongside Ford's plan,

which had been approved by the Senate Commerce Committee.

Since then, the staffs in the Lugar-McConnell camp have talked with their counterparts allied with Ford and Hollings, but no compromise has been put forward, Lugar said.

The Senate must choose one plan or the other.

Or not.

Lugar said one scenario he's heard mentioned is to keep both proposals in the bill, leaving differences to be settled later when the measure is before the House.

"I've not heard that one," Ford said. He predicted a close vote on either plan.

Lugar conceded that he has heard some grumbling from colleagues from farm states that \$18 billion for tobacco farmers isn't justified.

Lugar and Ford said they hoped to reach a deal by the time their turns come, whenever that is.

Indeed, if history is a guide, it often takes a sudden deadline, like a pending vote, to forge an agreement.

But if Ford should lose, he said he is prepared to offer as many as 70 amendments — a couple are about a thousand pages in length each — guaranteeing the bill would never be completed before the end of the Senate's legislative business in October.

"It would be about midnight on Jan. 2, 1999, the day I leave the Senate," Ford said, laughing. "I'm a poor loser and I'm going to fight for my farmers."

Survey of tobacco growers is called unscientific

Continued from Page One

tative results," said Dr. Ronald Langley, director of the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center.

McConnell, a Republican, was not available for an interview yesterday, but his press secretary, Robert Steurer, defended the senator's use of the survey findings.

"The only salient issue is that the Tobacco Fairness Coalition polled Kentucky and Tennessee burley tobacco growers and 63 percent of them favored a buyout of their quota," he said. "That the coalition is headquartered in North Carolina doesn't change that very basic fact."

UNTIL NOW, the Tobacco Fairness Coalition has been somewhat of a mystery, bursting into the tobacco debate at the 11th hour with surveys, money-raising appeals to tobacco farmers and press releases backing the McConnell proposal, which he is co-sponsoring with Sen. Richard Lugar, R-Ind.

The coalition, founded in February expressly to lobby Congress on tobacco legislation, has no office, no employees and no telephone number — only a post-office-box address in Wilson, N.C. But it has solid links to North Carolina tobacco interests.

The coalition's four-member board consists entirely of North Carolina farmers who grow between 200,000 and 600,000 pounds of flue-cured tobacco — much more than the small burley tobacco farms of Kentucky, which average yields of about 4,000 pounds.

Three of the board members also serve on boards of the Tobacco Growers Association of North Carolina or the North Carolina Growers Association.

Of the coalition's 12 advisers, eight live in North Carolina.

The coalition's Washington lobbyist is Richard Miller, former chief of staff to the late Republican Sen. John East of North Carolina.

"They don't represent the small family farm," charged Kentucky Sen. Wendell Ford. Ford, a Democrat who will leave office at the end of this year, has a competing plan to aid tobacco farmers that would retain the price-support program and offer voluntary buyouts.

Danny McKinney, chief executive officer of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association in Lexington, also is suspicious of the coalition and its survey.

"Do you want a buyout or do you want to jump off Clay's Ferry Bridge?" Their (survey) questions are about that loaded," he said.

But the coalition's Miller said, "Any reasonable individual would recognize . . . that there is a substantial number of growers in Kentucky who favor the buyout approach. . . . What we want is for Sen. Ford and those people who favor another approach to factor that in."

The coalition also polled flue-cured tobacco growers. Of those that responded, 86 percent favored the McConnell-Lugar plan.

The argument over the coalition's claim to speak for all tobacco farmers reflects the deep divisions among growers over how best to cushion the blow of comprehensive tobacco legislation being considered in Congress this summer.

To some extent, the controversy over the coalition also reveals the tensions between operators of the smaller, family-run farms typical of Kentucky and the sprawling, corporate-style farms of North Carolina.

MANY BURLEY growers worry that ending price supports will mean that small farms will disappear or be

swallowed up by large companies. Flue-cured tobacco growers in North Carolina and other states see their large farms as a huge investment and their sole source of income. Growing tobacco is not an income supplement for them as it is for many Kentucky farmers.

The large farms of North Carolina are well-represented on the Tobacco Fairness Coalition's board.

According to information supplied by the coalition, board member David Griffin of Spring Hope, N.C., grows tobacco on 100 acres with his son; board member Jerome Vick of Wilson, N.C., has 260 acres, split with a son and daughter; board member Kendall Hill of Kinston, N.C., shares his 200 acres with his two brothers' families; and board member Denny Lee of Buies Creek, N.C., has a family operation of more than 300 acres.

"It's clear the impetus to form the coalition came out of North Carolina," said Miller, its Washington lobbyist. "And North Carolina is predominantly a flue-cured tobacco state."

But Miller said the coalition wants a buyout because it is "in the best interests of the growers, flue-cured and burley."

"If . . . we were to become persuaded through our surveys that a majority of burley growers preferred some other option, we wouldn't have a problem supporting that option for them," he said.

The coalition's two surveys were accompanied by letters explaining that the group favored an end to price supports and wanted a buyout. Both surveys also included appeals for money, primarily for the coalition's Washington lobbying efforts, that so far have generated between \$75,000 and \$100,000, Miller said.

One survey was mailed to about

17,000 growers of flue-cured tobacco in seven states, of whom about 3,500 responded, Miller said.

The second survey went to between 14,000 and 15,000 burley farmers, of whom about 1,000 responded, Miller said.

THE FARMERS' names were obtained from mailing lists kept by two tobacco magazines, he said.

But UK's Langley said the results aren't a true sampling of growers, based on the low response rates — 20.5 percent of flue-cured growers and about 6.6 percent of burley growers. A rule of thumb for an accurate survey is about a 40 percent return rate, he said.

"What you're doing is you've got self-selection here," Langley explained. "These are the people who bothered to answer your mail. . . . It's only representative of the people who returned the questionnaire."

"The added appeal for financial support complicates matters," the Roper Center's Maynard said, adding that many of those who responded to the survey may have done so because they wanted to donate money, while those who did not respond may have rejected the survey as only a fund-raising letter.

The coalition's lone Kentucky adviser is R.T. Turner, a burley farmer in Horse Cave who owns a quota of about 40,000 pounds and leases quota of an additional 30,000 pounds.

At 64, he hopes to sell his farm and get out of tobacco farming.

"We have realized that the tobacco program is gone," Turner said. "It's over whether we like it or we don't. It's on a life-support system. Wendell Ford is that life-support system. When he leaves, the tobacco program will be gone with him. We need to get what money we can and get out."