This week, Minnesota Agri-Growth Council Communications Director, Adam Axvig, caught up with 2014 Annual Meeting and Conference Panelist, Randy Russell (pictured), to discuss the 2014 elections and the impacts it could have on ag issues at the federal level. Russell has been a partner of The Russell Group since 1986. Prior to the Russell Group, Russell served as Chief-of-Staff to Secretary of Agriculture, John Block, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of Economics at USDA. Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

**AA - What are things to look for in the 2014 elections?**

**RR** - I think right now, if Republicans can hold the incumbents that they have, which looks like is going to be the case, the odds are better than 60% the Senate flips.

**AA** - Do you see action on the Waters of the U.S. rule?

**RR** - I think on the Waters of the U.S., even if the Senate doesn’t flip, there’s enough opposition and concern about the broad nature of this rule, that the rule will be challenged. I think there are enough Democrats that are concerned about the broad implications and the overreach that it will be under review regardless. Probably much more so if the Senate goes Republican, but none-the-less it will be under review either way.

**AA - You were recently asked to lead the Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food, what can you tell me about this coalition?**

**RR** - The Coalition for Safe and Affordable Food is comprised of roughly forty groups, covering the gamut from producers to the grain handling and processing side to food companies, that are supporting this effort. This effort is really about one thing, hasn’t been a budget done in a very long time, would be to pass a budget.

I think you’ll also see Congress be much more aggressive on oversight and I’m not just talking about investigations, I’m talking about getting back to their job as a function of oversight for the agencies that each committee has responsibility for; whether it’s the Ag Committee over USDA or the Health, Education, and Labor Committee over FDA. I think you’re going to see a lot more of that, and that’s going to become more important because my guess is if the Senate does flip, the last two years of this administration are going to be very active with executive orders and with federal rule making. I think Congress will try to block some of those actions and how you go about doing that when the President has to sign legislation will be interesting to watch.

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ensuring that we don’t end up with a patchwork of different GMO labeling requirements throughout the country. The bill will direct FDA to establish guidelines for the industry to label their products as GMO-free. It will also ensure this system preempts states that have different rules. This is a large undertaking, if people want to learn more, there is a website, http://coalitionforsafeaffordablefood.org/

AA - What action do you see happening on the federal GMO labeling bill?

There are two more referendums this year, one in Colorado and one in Oregon and two defeated previously in California and Washington. We already have a state law in Vermont. You can imagine as a food company that is dealing in all fifty states, what it would be like to try to produce and then distribute products where you have a different labeling regimes in different parts of the country. It would be a nightmare. This is, quite simply, about protecting interstate commerce and providing national uniformity. It’s absolutely essential as states move ahead and some of them enact legislation, like the state of Vermont, or state referendums pending, not to have a patchwork system of each state having their own rules and regulations and labeling requirements in a national economy. It’s imperative that we get uniformity and it’s imperative that we protect interstate commerce and that’s really what this legislation is all about. I remain hopeful that next year we can advance the cause and get the bill enacted.

AA - Do you see action happening on the GMO labeling bill even if the Senate remains in Democratic control?

RR - I think that there is going to be action on the bill next year, regardless, and I think that it’s going to become more apparent to more and more people that a patchwork system is going to have a huge cost, not just on the food companies; but also on the growers who have embraced the technology. It’s a critically important issue for our industry. It is an issue that is very active at the state level, as you know here in Minnesota, and in many other states. Some people try to make the argument for a consumer’s right-to-know, but the bottom line is this is a threat to the technology, a threat to interstate commerce, and we need to deal with it once and for all and make sure we have national uniformity.

What percentage of corn, soybeans sugar beets in the state of Minnesota are biotech? My guess would be 99% of sugar beets are biotech. I would suspect with corn and soybeans roughly 95% are biotech, so I think growers certainly get it, the handlers get it, the food companies get it, so it’s something that needs to be dealt with and dealt with soon. There’s a sense of urgency to get this done.

AA - Do you foresee action, either Congressional or Executive, on the rail issue?

RR - The best thing that Congress can do, and some members of congress are doing, Senators Amy Klobuchar and John Thune for example, is weighing in with the railroads directly, having meetings with them. I know Senators Hoeven and Heitkamp have also held meetings. Right now, you can’t pass legislation to impact something that’s occurring this Fall; with a big crop coming on board and the competition in the rail service from the oil and energy sector in the Upper Midwest, that’s a challenge. I think the biggest thing we can do is have the members that represent our area weigh in and ensure that the STB (Surface Transportation Board) knows how critically important it is that we have access to rail cars and rail service with this big crop coming on board and what it means in terms of basis and what farmers actually get paid when this system gets disrupted and heavily backloaded. I think that pressure has been going on and continues. I think Senator Thune and others are taking a very hard look at legislation about the powers that are given to the STB and try to level the playing field so that shippers have a greater voice and avenue for redress when these kinds of issues occur in the future.

AA - What impacts could the elections have on the respective ag committees in Congress?

RR - If the Senate stays Democrat, Senator Debbie Stabenow could remain chairman. Now, there is a possibility that because of a shuffle with retirements, specifically with Senator Harkin retiring, Senator Patty Murray would go to the Senate Health, Education, and Labor Committee, and then the Budget Committee would open up so that creates a potential opportunity for Senator Stabenow to take that, but I’m not saying she’s going to.

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The Minnesota Agri-Growth Council is an advocate for the state’s food and agriculture industry. Founded in 1968, Agri-Growth is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that represents the shared interests of its 200-plus members, which include food and agriculture businesses, organizations and producers, as well as the service industries that support them.
November 6th - Annual Meeting Member Program

8:15 am — Welcome, Reports and Elections

9:00 am — Agriculture Economic Outlook: Michael Swanson, Agricultural Economist, Sr. Vice President, Wells Fargo

10:00 am — “Ethics, Values and Science – Building Trust in an Age of Radical Transparency,”

Charlie Arnot, CEO, Center for Food Integrity

11:00 am — “The Borlaug Centennial: Inspiring the “Next Generation” to Confront the Greatest Challenge in the History of Agriculture.”

Ambassador Kenneth Quinn, President, World Food Prize Foundation

November 6th - Luncheon Banquet and Speakers Program

Noon — Luncheon and Welcome, Agri-Growth Chair, Steve Peterson, General Mills

2013 Distinguished Service Award Presentation

Keynote Remarks — Doug Baker, Chairman of the Board and Chief Executive Officer, Ecolab Inc.

2:15 pm — Afternoon Panel Discussion: “Food Production Sustainability - Trends/Issues/Opportunities”

Opening Remarks by Dr. Brian Buhr, Dean, CFANS, University of Minnesota

Panel Discussion: Moderator, Agri-Growth Chair, Steve Peterson, General Mills

• Rod Snyder, Executive Director, Field to Market

• Tyler Grove, General Agronomist, American Crystal Sugar Cooperative

• Jennifer Shaw, Head of Sustainable Sourcing Solutions, Syngenta North America

• Katrina Heinze, Organic Industry Affairs, General Mills

4:00 pm — 2014 Election review and discussion, moderated by Mary Lahammer, Program Host and Political Reporter, Twin Cities Public Television

• Vin Weber, Partner, Mercury LLC, and former U.S. Congressman

• Randy Russell, President, The Russell Group

• Roger Moe, President of National Strategies Inc. and former Minnesota Senate Majority Leader

• Laura Brod, Senior Vice President, LS2 Group, former Member Minnesota House of Representatives

5:00pm - 7:00 pm — Reception

You’re cordially invited to join us on Nov. 6th at the Minneapolis Convention Center, register at http://bit.ly/2014AMRegistration

November 5th - 6-8pm, Pre-Conference Reception at Brit’s Pub, 1100 Nicollet Mall, Minneapolis

2014 Board of Directors:

Executive Officers:

Chair: Steve Peterson, General Mills

Vice Chair: Pat Lunemann, Twin Eagle Dairy & Minnesota Milk Producers Association

Secretary: Jim Winter, Ecolab

Treasurer: Mark Jirik, Cargill, Inc.

Immediate Past Chair: Kristin Weeks Duncanson, Duncanson Growers

Directors:

Dr. Brian Buhr, University of Minnesota

Mark Davis, Davisco Foods International, Inc.

Paul DeBriyn, AgStar Financial Services

Randal J. Doyal, Al-Corn Clean Fuel Commission

David Frederickson, Minnesota Dept. of Agriculture

Meg Freking, New Fashion Pork

Tim Gerlach, Minnesota Corn Growers Assoc.

Heidi Hawkins, Wells Fargo Bank

Kate Leavitt, SunOpta Grains and Foods Group

Darcy Pawlik, Syngenta Seeds, Inc.

Alan Poff, Schwan Food Company

Lexann Reischl, GNP Company

Tom Rosen, Rosen’s Diversified

Nick Sinner, Red River Sugarbeet Growers Association

Don Shiefelbein, Shiefelbein Farms

Joe Swedberg, Hormel Foods Corporation

Linda Tank, CHS Inc.

Dan Tjornejoj, Minnesota Veterinary Association

Tom Wegner, Land O’Lakes, Inc.

Don Wick, Red River Farm Network

www.agrigrowth.org
The 2014 Minnesota Agri-Growth Council Annual Meeting and Conference will be November 6th at the Minneapolis Convention Center. To attend this event, please register online at www.agrigrowth.org or complete this form and return via email (info@agrigrowth.org), fax (651.905.8902), or mail (400 Robert Street North, Suite 1520, Saint Paul, Minnesota 55101-2069).

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**BILLING INFORMATION:**

Select One: ☐ Invoice Me  ☐ Pay by credit card below  ☐ Enclosed is my check, payable to MN Agri-Growth

Your Name: _____________________________________________

Organization Name (Name to appear in Program): ________________________________

Mailing Address: _____________________________________________

City: ___________________ State: _______________ Zip: ________________

Phone: _______________ Fax: _______________ Email: ____________________

Credit Card: ___________________ Expiration: ___________________ Security Number: _____
In the scenario where Republicans take over, and if Senator Pat Roberts wins re-election, and I believe he will, he would be the first member to serve as Chair of both the House and Senate Ag Committees. Senator Cochran would likely go back to the Appropriations Committee.

If Senator Stabenow for some reason left the Ag Committee’s senior post, the post would likely go to Senator Sherrod Brown or Senator Amy Klobuchar.

In the House, we are going to have a change in the Ag Committee because they have term limits for Republican chairs. Frank Lucas has been chair for six years and therefore cannot serve again, so the new chair would be Mike Conaway from Texas, assuming Republicans do retain control, and Collin (Peterson, pictured) would remain ranking member.

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**Annual Meeting Afternoon Program**

Kicking off the afternoon at the 2014 Annual Meeting and Conference is the awards luncheon featuring a keynote address by Ecolab Inc. CEO, Doug Baker and the announcement of the Distinguished Service Award winner.

Following the lunch will be the first of two panels. The first panel will focus on sustainability and features participants from organizations such as Field to Market and various global corporate leaders in sustainability. The first panel will be moderated by Agri-Growth board chair, Steve Peterson, from General Mills. Participants in the first panel include:

- Jennifer Shaw - Head of Sustainable Sourcing Solutions, Syngenta North America
- Rod Snyder, Executive Director, Field to Market
- Katrina Heinze, Organic Industry Affairs, General Mills
- Tyler Grove, General Agronomist, American Crystal Sugar Cooperative

After a brief break, our afternoon program closes off with a political panel that features an outstanding mix of federal and state level perspectives. With election day being held just two days prior to this panel, there will be plenty to talk about.

Back by popular demand to moderate (wrangle?) is TPT’s Mary Lahammer. Our political panel participants are:

- Vin Weber, Partner, Mercury LLC, and former U.S. Congressman
- Randy Russell, President, The Russell Group
- Roger Moe, President of National Strategies, Inc. and former Minnesota Senate Majority Leader
- Laura Brod, Senior Vice President, LS2 Group, former member Minnesota House of Representatives

Following our final panel will be a reception at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

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**New for 2014! Pre-Meeting Reception Added!**

Due to popular demand, Agri-Growth added a reception the night before the Annual Meeting activities on Thursday. The reception runs from 6-8pm on Wednesday night at Brit’s Pub and Eating Establishment located in downtown Minneapolis, just blocks from the Hilton. “We added another reception because attendees consistently indicate they value the networking opportunities that Agri-Growth events provide. We felt that a ‘night before’ reception would be a great way to foster those opportunities, especially with folks coming in from out-of-town,” said Agri-Growth executive director, Perry Aasness.

Thank you to the north central chapter of the National Agri-Marketing Association (NAMA), who stepped up to sponsor the event.