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Outlook on the 108th Congress

by: Robert Fouburg

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In the previous issue of the *Journal of Agricultural Lending*, I indicated my surprise that despite key Senate contests against several Midwestern Democrats, Congressional Republicans and the White House remained opposed to a multi-billion-dollar agricultural disaster assistance package. I also discussed the remote possibility that such a package would be adopted during the lame duck session of the 107th Congress following the election.

No such assistance was passed by the 107th Congress, and, despite this fact, Republicans netted an additional eight seats in the House and regained the majority in the Senate by defeating Democrat incumbents in Georgia and Missouri and winning the Minnesota seat left open by the death of Sen. Paul Wellstone, while losing only one Republican-held seat in Arkansas.

Enter the 108th Congress where, no sooner had the Senate convened, than the body degenerated into partisan bickering. Despite the fact that Republicans regained the majority in the Senate, exploitation by Democrats of Senate procedural rules is preventing Republicans from regaining committee chairmanships and preventing the assignment of all new Senators to committees. In addition to these procedural con-

cerns, Congress has not passed 11 of the 13 appropriations bills necessary to fund the federal government for the current fiscal year. What was the responsibility of the 107th Congress has been laid at the feet of the 108th. While I expect all of these issues will soon be resolved, the first few weeks of 2003 do not bode well for a harmonious and productive 108th Congress.

Regarding agricultural disaster assistance, a number of bills representing a variety of approaches to the need have been introduced by representatives and senators from across the country. Some would cover both the 2001 crop and the 2002 crop; some would cover either the 2001 crop or the 2002 crop; some would treat all producers equally; some would give additional assistance to those producers who insured their crops; some would cover all crops and livestock; and some are more selective. The Senate Republican version of a bill that encompasses all of the remaining 11 appropriations bills includes \$3.1 billion in agricultural disaster assistance that would cover a variety of crops and livestock.

It is impossible at this stage to determine which, if any, approach to agricultural disaster assistance will make it to the president's desk or when that might happen. However, the ABA will continue to monitor the debate and the activities of the various farm and rural organizations engaged in the process, and we welcome bankers to contact us with their concerns.

In other agricultural news, shortly after being elected to his 10th term in the House, Rep. Larry Combest (R-TX-19), announced that he would resign from the House at the end of May and that he would step down immediately as chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture, a position he held during the 106th and 107th Congresses. Combest's announcement cleared the way for Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA-6) to assume the chairmanship of the Agriculture panel.¹ Goodlatte is currently serving his sixth term in the House and hails from the Shenandoah Valley in southwestern

Virginia, one of the most agriculturally diversified areas of the United States. Goodlatte served previously as the chairman of the House Committee on Agriculture Subcommittee on Department [USDA] Operations, Oversight, Nutrition, and Forestry.

The shift back to a Republican majority in the Senate brings a new chairman to the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. Once an organizing resolution

is agreed to in the Senate, Sen. Thad Cochran (R-MS) will assume control of the committee.² In addition, Cochran will likely also serve as chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture, Rural Development, and Related Agencies. Cochran was elected in November to his fifth term in the Senate. Prior to his service in the Senate, he served three terms in the House.

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¹ Rep. John Boehner (R-OH-8) is the senior Republican on the House Committee on Agriculture. However, Boehner chose to remain as chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, and rules of the House of Representatives prevent a member from serving as chairman of more than one committee.

² Sen. Richard Lugar (R-IN) is the senior Republican on the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry. However, Lugar chose to serve as chairman of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and rules of the Senate Republican Caucus prevent a Senator from serving as Chairman of more than one committee.