



Strengthening Rural America, League of Rural Voter's Niel Ritchie, RuralVotes Co-founders Deb and Matt with US Senator Blanche Lincoln.

**Hilltown View by Matt L. Barron**

## **The Democrats' Ceres and Demeter**

Almost four months after the 2004 election, Harry Reid was still pissed. Still smarting from George Bush's victory, Reid said that his colleague Sen. John Kerry lost the race for the White House in part because Democrats "neglected rural America." In remarks at a Reno news conference before a speech to the Nevada Legislature in Carson City in late February 2005, Reid added "I think around the country people just thought they could win in the cities."

But Reid did more than deliver a tongue lashing to the Bay State's junior senator. The then-minority leader began crafting a strategy for his party to become more competitive in small towns and rural communities. Some of Reid's plans involved legislation and policy. "In the farm programs, we are the ones who support the farmers, (Republicans) support the bankers," he told the Associated Press. "In the Medicare bill, that is Democratic stuff in there related to helping rural hospitals," he added. Sen. Reid has just released a new book *The Good Fight – Hard Lessons from Searchlight to Washington* where he recalls his rural upbringing in the southern Nevada mining town of Searchlight.

It is said that Republicans take rural voters for granted and Democrats ignore them. To help change this equation, Reid created a Rural Outreach Committee in his Democratic Caucus and tapped Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas to chair the group. On the House side, Nancy Pelosi formed the House Rural Working Group and named Rep. Stephanie Herseth to honcho the panel. Think of Herseth and Lincoln as the Democrats' Ceres and Demeter, the Roman and Greek goddesses of agriculture and rural life.

Recently, Sen. Lincoln took a break from tedious negotiations on the Farm Bill conference committee to huddle with a group of rural leaders in the nation's capital and talk about her role in pushing the Democratic message on rural issues. As the daughter of a seventh generation Arkansas farm family from the rice fields of the Mississippi Delta, Lincoln knows firsthand of the problems and challenges that face rural localities and families. She draws on those personal experiences to give her a unique perspective on the priorities for rural America.

“I’m probably one of the few members of the Senate who’s actually scouted cotton and walked rice levees,” Lincoln told the activists.

Sen. Lincoln touched on another issue which rural folks know all too well, how deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan hit home on the home front. Since many rural hamlets are committing a disproportionate share of sons and daughters to the National Guard and Reserves in the Middle East, often rural towns lack enough municipal leaders and public safety personnel to keep local governments functioning. Just to keep tiny Bradford, Arkansas (pop. 834), running, Lincoln said the town had to bring an 82 year-old woman who was a former mayor out of retirement because the mayor, fire chief and police chief were called up for active duty and sent overseas.

Last May, when a tornado ripped apart Greensburg, Kansas, Gov. Kathleen Sebelius noted that the cleanup and rescue effort was hampered because of the heavy equipment and trucks that her state’s National Guard uses were in Bagdad’s Green Zone when they should have been in Greensburg. And when wildfires ravaged Montana’s forests last summer, Gov. Brian Schweitzer complained that his National Guard helicopters were being shot at in Iraq instead of dropping water and fire retardant on the Swan and Mission Mountain Ranges in western Montana.

Rep. Herseth has also worked hard to highlight issues that link rural and urban constituencies together. Her first TV ad in her 2005 special election opened with the then-candidate in a beef feedlot being circled by some hefty Herefords. As Herseth lambasted the Republicans for blocking County of Origin Labeling (COOL) of meat and poultry, the scene cuts to a supermarket meat aisle where Herseth picks up a package of ground chuck from the refrigerated case and pledges to pass the COOL bill so livestock producers can keep exporting to foreign markets and American consumers can feel confident that the burger on their backyard grill is safe to consume. Fast forward to today and Herseth is making good on her promise as the Democrat-drafted Farm Bill that will soon land on President Bush’s desk contains the COOL provision in the conference report.

As the presidential election year plays out, Sen. Lincoln and Rep. Herseth will be making sure that the Democrats’ rural agenda is not pushed to the side of the trail and that rural votes are harvested come fall. Expect both women to be visible in Denver at the national convention and in prime time. “We must continue to be a voice for rural America and raise these issues with our leadership on both sides of the aisle,” Lincoln notes.