

Farmfest will host herd of pols

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Over the years, politicians have flocked to Farmfest like yellowjackets swarm to pop cans in late summer. It's happening again at the 2007 Farmfest, which begins Tuesday at the Gilfillan estate near Redwood Falls.

Election years bring particularly heavy doses of candidates and elected officials to the event. Last year's line-up included all of the major candidates for statewide office, along with soon-to-be House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco.

This year, despite the absence of a general election in November, will bring U.S. senators, members of Congress, Ag Secretary Mike Johanns, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and more.

"The line-up we have for this is kind of second-to-none," said Kent Thiesse, vice president of MinnStar Bank in Lake Crystal and the long-time organizer of Farmfest forums.

Thiesse attributes the festival's success at drawing politicians to its long and consistent history of generating big crowds of farmers, reporters from the general media in Minnesota and coverage from agricultural media across the country. It also helps that the event is traditionally held during Congress' August recess.

"The timing is usually good," he said.

That's particularly true for the premiere forum this year — "The New Farm Bill — Shaping the Future of Rural America."

Rep. Collin Peterson, the chairman of the House Agriculture Committee, and Rep. Tim Walz, a member of the committee, will be able to talk about the bill the House has already finalized. Sens. Norm Coleman and Amy Klobuchar, who serve on the Senate Ag Committee, will be able to talk about likely differences the Senate will have with the House when it begins crafting its bill after the summer recess.

And Johanns will be able to present the Bush administration's goals, along with its objections to the House bill, Thiesse said.

The forum begins at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday in the Forum Tent.

Also on Tuesday, at 1:30 p.m., Arctic explorer Will Steger will discuss global warming followed by a panel discussion of agriculture's role in finding solutions.

At 10:30 a.m. Wednesday, Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau, state Ag Commissioner Gene Hugoson, DNR Commissioner Mark Holsten and others will thrash out farm land usage and the

balancing act the state is trying to achieve between farm production, conservation and urban development.

The 1:30 p.m. panel on Wednesday will discuss grain marketing, and the 10:30 a.m. panel on Thursday will focus on strategies for strengthening the rural Minnesota economy.

Pawlenty will wrap up the events at the Forum Tent at 1:30 p.m. Thursday with a speech prior to the "Farm Family of the Year" program.

Based on past attendance, Thiesse expects from 800 to well over 1,000 people at the events.

"There are people that come year after year," he said. "And some people come all three days to hear the forums."