

# Cultivating support

## Peterson will leave House for different role in the state's agricultural sector as head of farmers union

By SARAH MCKENZIE

**R**ep. Doug Peterson, an architect of the state's ethanol program, has been elected president of the Minnesota Farmers Union and will serve the remainder of his House term but not seek re-election.

The six-term DFLer from Madison in west-central Minnesota said in his new position he will work with state and federal lawmakers from both parties to bolster the state's agriculture community. The union represents more than 15,000 state farmers.

Outlining his priorities for the farmers union, Peterson said he will push for profitable commodity prices, agriculture-based energy production, mobilizing support among urban Minnesotans with rural roots, and building partnerships with other advocacy groups.

"The people of rural Minnesota — whether farmers, business owners, retirees, working parents or whatever their position in life — have common interests in getting a fair shake in the changing economy," said Peterson, who owns a 300-acre farm in Lac Qui Parle County.

Peterson's agenda builds on his accomplishments at the State Capitol. He points to his work on the Minnesota Model on Ethanol as prescient policy that steered the state toward energy independence before it became a more pressing, national security issue in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

"It was fairly visionary," said Peterson, 53, DFL lead on the House Agriculture and Rural Development Finance Committee. "The Minnesota model has become a model for the nation."

Beginning in 1997 the state required that all gasoline sold in the state contain a minimum 2.7 percent oxygen content — which includes the corn-based additive ethanol. Supporters have heralded it as a clean-burning alternative fuel that reduces carbon dioxide emissions. Opponents have challenged ethanol's environmental benefits and labeled it a costly agriculture subsidy.

The state has also established a 20-cent per gallon producer payment to encourage ethanol production.

Rep. Bob Ness (R-Dassel), chair of the

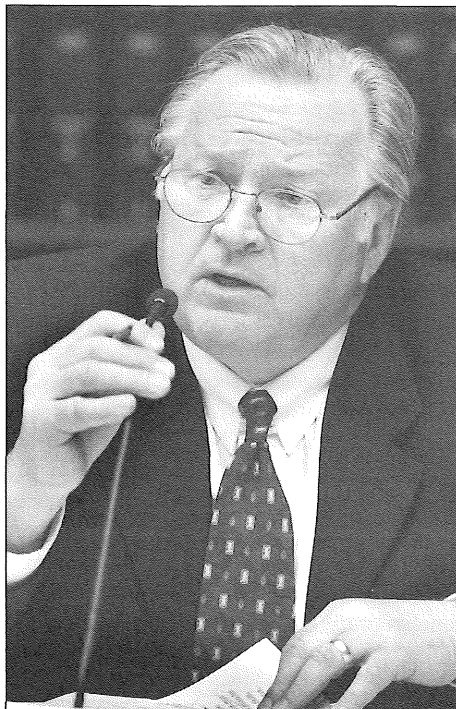


PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

**Rep. Doug Peterson, who was recently elected president of the Minnesota Farmers Union, will leave the House after this term.**

agriculture finance committee, said Peterson "has worked hard for agriculture" and has been a strong advocate of ethanol while in the House.

"He is not afraid to speak up when he believes in something," Ness said. "Doug has been a valued member of my committee and we have worked well together."

Rep. Ruth Johnson (DFL-St. Peter), also a member of the agriculture policy and finance committees, said Peterson has served as a mentor to her on agriculture issues.

"Whenever I wanted to know how a piece of legislation would affect farmers, I would discuss it with Doug," Johnson said. "From his own experience on the farm, he is a passionate proponent of sustainable, family farm-based agriculture."

Peterson has also been a strong supporter of the biodiesel legislation that became law this year. It will require that all diesel fuel sold in the state

contain at least 2 percent of the additive, derived from soybeans or other plant oils, by 2005.

The state lawmaker is also known for founding the Minnesota Right to Be Rural Coalition in 1996 along with state and federal DFLers, including U.S. Sen. Paul Wellstone, former state Sen. Tracy Beckman (DFL-Bricelyn) and former U.S. Rep. David Minge.

The coalition promotes, among other things, equal access to public services, home-grown economic development, affordable higher education, fairness in taxation, and balanced environmental policies

The group worked to establish the Center for Rural Policy and Development in 1997, a think tank based at Minnesota State University, Mankato.

Jack Geller, the center president, said few legislators speak about Greater Minnesota with "both the passion and the eloquence that Rep. Peterson can."


"While he would be the first to tell you that he doesn't have all the answers to what ails rural Minnesota, he is persistent in convincing you that rural Minnesota counts," Geller said. "That we all (i.e. urban, suburban, and rural) should care about what happens to our rural communities, family farms, and our rural way of life."

Peterson said he'll miss the camaraderie of the Legislature and the gratification of solving a constituent problem.

He recalled helping a man secure benefits who had trouble navigating the state's bureaucracy. Peterson said the man stopped him years later and said, "Because of you I have a decent life."

Jim Curtiss, the mayor of Montevideo in Peterson's district, said the representative "bends over backwards" to help people.

Peterson stops at least once a month at Curtiss' restaurant, Trailways Cafe, to talk to members of the community.

"He's very open and easy to talk to," Curtiss said. "There isn't enough I can say about how good he's been." 

## STEPPING DOWN

**Rep. Doug Peterson**

**DFL**

**District 13B — Madison**

**Terms: 6**

**Career Notes:** Peterson supported legislation that established the state's ethanol development program, and he has promoted the biodiesel industry. He also worked on bills in 1998 that strengthened the state's oversight of feedlots.