

35 Years of Feed, Facts and Laughs



Steve Kopperud, an instrumental government affairs expert who has served the American Feed Industry Association for the past 35 years, will be retiring from AFIA service at the end of the year. AFIA appreciates Kopperud's service, as he has dedicated hours, days, weeks, months and years to the betterment of the industry.

Son of a feed industry executive and former AFIA board member, and a journalist by education and training, Kopperud often tells the story to anyone who'll listen that it was his career plan to never have anything to do with agriculture. Well, so much for best-laid plans. He spent more than 20 years serving as senior vice president of legislative affairs at AFIA and almost 15 years as a government affairs consultant.

Sarah Novak, AFIA vice president of membership and public relations, recently sat down with Kopperud to learn some fun facts about him, his career and his past, present and future plans in the feed industry.

Q: WHAT TIME DO YOU WAKE UP EACH MORNING?

A: Between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m., with or without an alarm. I'm generally in my office by 5:30 a.m. It's a "talent" inherited from my dad.

Q: WHAT IS ONE WORD TO DESCRIBE YOUR FEELINGS ON YOUR FIRST DAY IN WASHINGTON, D.C.?

A: Disbelief – that a 20-something reporter was in D.C., meeting and interviewing politicians and national leaders, going to White House press briefings and wandering around Congress – like I belonged here.

Q: AND TODAY?

A: Disbelief – that I still get to wander around Congress like I belong here, and that I still get that "feeling" when I see the Capitol dome from a car window or check in for a White House appointment. I believe if you don't get the "feeling" every time you pass the Washington Monument or Lincoln Memorial, it's time to get out of town; you've been here too long.

Q: IF YOU COULD HAVE DINNER WITH THREE PEOPLE FROM CAPITOL HILL, WHO WOULD THEY BE?

A: These choices are completely based on intellectual, political and entertainment value.

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Today? House Speaker Paul Ryan, Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, and Senator Bernie Sanders. I'd let them all bring a plus-one from within their respective caucuses.

Over the last 35 years? A tie between former House Speaker Newt Gingrich or former House Speaker John Boehner, the late Senator Jesse Helms, and former Texas Representative Charlie Stenholm – ditto on the date provision.

Q: WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR FAVORITE PART OF WORKING IN WASHINGTON, D.C., OVER THE LAST NEARLY 40 YEARS?

A: The opportunity to be part of the policy and political process, both as a reporter and an advocate for the feed industry. My great pride is successfully leveraging the Capitol Hill process in an honest way to the benefit of the feed industry specifically and U.S. agriculture generally.

Q: AND YOUR LEAST FAVORITE PART(S)?

A: The pettiness – generally by the smallest intellects. Also, great egos among our elected and appointed politicians and the near-total politicization of the process in recent years drives me nuts. I also cringe at the never-ending pursuit of campaign money that always comes with some string attached and truly contaminates the process. On all three counts, the country loses.

I also think the blind pursuit of so-called “ethics” rules have sucked much of the personal interaction and fun out of the game. No one buys a vote with a hamburger at lunch or a beer after work, but the opportunity to establish a more personal, long-term working relationship is lost at the same time. I miss the days when there was no email, iPhone, texting, Blackberry or any other electronic device. You had to physically be on the Hill, walking the halls, dropping into offices; then, the lack of electronic connection forced you to actually speak to a person face-to-face.

Q: WHAT KEEPS YOU SANE IN A SEA OF INSANITY (AKA WASHINGTON)?

A: I remind myself daily – generally while driving to work at 5:15 a.m. – that while important, lobbying and the political process are neither rocket science nor brain surgery. I also remind myself that

perhaps the greatest survival skills in this town are a sense of humor and patience, in that order.

I'm very lucky among lobbyists. AFIA has never asked or ordered me to advocate a position in which I didn't personally believe. I learned to lobby from a master – the late American Feed Manufacturers Association (now AFIA) President Oakley Ray – who taught me to keep perspective: “We're not the Farm Bureau or the Teamsters.”

I hate to lose an issue, and I can honestly say, it has happened only a few times in 35 years, and never on something “big.” As long as I can honestly say I did my homework, worked up a winning strategy and worked my butt off, no matter what the outcome, I could sleep at night and get up to give it another shot the next day.

I have little patience for stupid or self-important people, which can be a real liability in this town. So I give great thanks that I'm blessed to work with smart, funny and clever people, all trying to do the right thing. When I look at the AFIA staff, particularly today, I see honest, solid, hard work from some of the best and brightest in D.C. If I didn't believe it, I wouldn't say it.

Most importantly, I'm the most fortunate of men because I am married to a most incredible woman. The Lovely Judy K is not “in the business” – which has saved our

marriage more than once – but she is smarter than me, understands the insanity, and does not hesitate to tell me when I'm being a jerk. She also, thank the good Lord, is always there to pull me back when I'm about to go over the edge.

Q: WHAT ADVICE DO YOU HAVE FOR ANYONE BEGINNING A CAREER IN THE FEED INDUSTRY?

A: Never forget our industry is the first step from the farm on the road to feeding this country and the planet. I truly can't think of a more important role to play. This is an industry of which you can and must be incredibly proud. Talk to the ultimate customers at all opportunities because our endeavor is honest, our people are solid, and there's no option save for success.

Q: WHAT WILL YOU BE DOING A YEAR FROM NOW?

A: Exactly what I want to do when I want to do it, though, I'll very likely still be waking up between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m.

I will not “retire” in any classic sense. I have plans for a blog, built with smart contributors with whom I've worked and from whom I've learned over the years. I want to create a forum where a politically incorrect message, but an important perspective which should be acknowledged nonetheless, can find a home. I want to deal with the spectrum of issues affecting production agriculture, feed, food, consumers and technology. I want to give to blinkered food industry executives an insight many do not currently enjoy.

For all at AFIA – staff and members – I honestly offer to always be available to help in any way I can. This is what I've done for 35 years and it's a habit nearly impossible to break. As to timing, it will all depend on if I and the Lovely Judy K are on an airplane or a road trip. ■

DID YOU KNOW?

Cows, sheep and goats are among the most popular ruminants, or animals with four-compartment stomachs to help them digest plant-based foods.