

# Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative: Michael Torrey says advocacy is critical for dairy policy post-election

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GREEN BAY, Wis. — Advocating at the federal level for dairy farmers will be crucial with new lawmakers set to join Congress and potentially a new president heading to the White House, Michael Torrey, a longtime expert on farm legislation, said this week.

“There are going to be a lot of new faces, there is going to be new philosophy (and) going to be new leadership. So, it is important to be engaged in Washington, D.C.,” Torrey told members of Edge Dairy Farmer Cooperative on Nov. 11 during a video conference.



Torrey, the principal and founder of Michael Torrey Associates, is a veteran of Capitol Hill who, among other roles, served as an adviser to former presidential candidate Bob Dole and as deputy chief of staff at the U.S. Department of

Agriculture. Torrey works with Edge, which advocates on federal policy for its Midwest dairy farmers and processors.

His presentation, a week after one of the most contentious U.S. presidential elections, reviewed key congressional changes and how a potential Joe Biden administration might affect farmers.

The challenge of making sure lawmakers understand the complexities of dairy issues is growing, Torrey said. He pointed to the defeat of Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., a longtime member and current chairman of the House Agriculture Committee who, Torrey said, understands dairy policy more than most in either political party.

Torrey touched on the potential impact of the election on Edge's top priorities:

- **Environment and changing climate:** Despite the talk of a sweeping New Green Deal, Torrey doesn't see major climate legislation coming if Republicans retain control of the Senate, which appears probable. President-elect Biden has promised to rejoin the Paris multi-country climate accord. President Trump withdrew the U.S. from that agreement.

Edge's general position is that environment- and climate-focused policies affecting farmers should be guided by farmers, grounded in science, financially viable, and flexible to allow farmers to innovate.

- **Immigration and workforce:** Biden could use executive orders for things like protecting Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), but major legislation is unlikely in the next two years, Torrey predicted. However, he said the focus on the economy, which is hampered by a lack of available labor, does provide reason to keep pushing for ag workforce improvements.

Edge, which advocates for a new year-round visa that will be practical for

livestock farms, wants a way for farmers to protect their existing workforce while also having consistent opportunities to hire new foreign-born workers.

- **International trade:** Whereas Trump has been willing to have the U.S. go it alone on trade by using tariffs, Biden has indicated that he would pursue a multi-lateral approach, including with China, Torrey said.

Edge sees robust trade as key to long-term success for the dairy community. The co-op supports developing new agreements that would give dairy farmers and processors better access to new foreign markets as the demand for protein grows along with the global population.

- **Dairy labeling:** It's highly unlikely that a Biden administration would move the needle in dairy's favor, Torrey said.

Edge has fought against mislabeling of plant-based beverages and other products that use terms like milk and cheese. The cooperative sees these labels as unfair to customers and to farmers. Edge co-commissioned a study that showed that customers are being misled about ingredients and nutritional quality.

- **Domestic policy:** Billions of dollars have gone to farmers because of the COVID-19 pandemic and retaliatory trade tariffs, but Torrey said there are unknowns about how agriculture would fare under a new administration.

Edge has expressed appreciation for the government's recognition of the essential role of dairy farmers. At the same time, the co-op is eager to move longstanding priorities forward.

A key part of Edge's mission is to get members engaged in advocacy, Tim Trotter, Edge's executive director, said.

Trotter said providing insights from Torrey is one way to do that.

He also noted several other opportunities for members: one-on-one conversations with lawmakers on Capitol Hill as part of Edge's "Dairy Speaks in D.C." trips, participation on Edge's policy committee, tools like VoterVoice that make it easy to speak out on specific proposals, and farm visits by top officials. Edge hosted Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue for a member town hall in October at Edge President Brody Stapel's farm.

"The voices of Edge's dairy farmers and processors matter to decision-makers in Washington, so providing our members with those opportunities is a top priority," Trotter said. "The more we all speak up and convey who we are and what matters most on the farms and in the processing plants, the more of a positive impact we will have for the dairy community."