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Udall & Musgrave Strange political bedfellows

By JOHN SCHROYER
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The bipartisan back-scratching in Windsor on Tuesday was an interesting sight. Heading into a year where both are likely facing solid campaign challenges, Democratic U.S. Rep. Mark Udall in the only open senate race in the country and Republican U.S. Rep. Marilyn Musgrave in a district that almost didn't reelect her in 2006, both could likely use all



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U.S. Reps. Mark Udall, Democrat, and Marilyn Musgrave, Republican, in true bipartisan fashion.

PHOTO BY CORY KNIGHT/THE COLORADO STATESMAN

...Colorado political opposites unite to help rural Colorado

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the help they can get, and they're certainly finding it from each other.

The pair, who stood side by side during the entire forum and looked for all the world as though they were members of the same party, bounced ideas and stories off each other

Tuesday afternoon during an agricultural forum and joked about their alliance. One story they shared a laugh over was when Udall mentioned that Musgrave got him into the White House to talk to President George W. Bush about line-item vetoes. The message for both, however, was simple.

"There are only seven of us in the House from Colorado. Most of the time we hang together to make sure our state's voice is heard. We have our disagreements, but we're standing together," said Udall.

Musgrave echoed, "We care about our state. It's important to work together."

The forum, hosted by the Dairy Farmers of America, the Farm Bureau, the Rocky Mountain Farmers Union, the Sugarbeet Growers Association, the Wheat Growers Administrative Committee, the Livestock Association, the Cattlemen's Association, and the Corn Growers Association, was set up to act as a dialogue between the two representatives and the agricultural community to discuss issues.

The pair heard a number of serious concerns, and discussed the potential for increased federal supplemental funding for farmers, weather disaster relief, illegal immigration, labor shortages, and perhaps most significantly, the question of the Republican River Valley basin in Northeastern Colorado.

According to the 1942 Republican River Valley Compact, Colorado is legally bound to deliver a certain amount of water to Nebraska and Kansas because neither of those two states have water sources of their own with which to irrigate crops. Since the drought began in the late 1990s, neither of those states were getting

nearly what they needed. After a lengthy lawsuit, the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 2001 that Colorado, despite the fact that all three states were still recovering from the drought, is not required to give up simply a



U.S. Reps. Marilyn Musgrave, R-CD 4 and Mark Udall, D-CD 2, chat in Windsor.

PHOTO BY CORY KNIGHT/THE COLORADO STATESMAN

percentage of its water but a set minimum amount. The court gave Colorado five years to comply with its order, beginning in 2002. If the state has not fulfilled its end of the bargain by the end of this year, all 4,000 wells in the basin will be completely shut off, despite the 400 that have already been shut down as a result of local battles between municipalities and farmers.

"It's the death knell for rural Colorado," Musgrave asserted.

Byron Weathers of the Colorado Corn Growers Association noted that the Republican River Valley Basin comprises 580,000 acres, produces 70 percent of Colorado's corn, and is

responsible for roughly \$3 billion in annual state revenues.

"This is a crisis," he said. "What we need is an act of Congress."

But even Weathers isn't sure that would work, since the Supreme Court

has already ruled on the case. He estimates that since the drought has been over for some time now and the water shed is beginning to replenish itself, all Northern Colorado needs is two to three years more before they'll be able to comply with the compact without completely devastating their own community and state. One possibility, he said, is if the governors of all three states got together to hammer out a compromise. But he said he has so far not heard anything from Gov. Bill Ritter's office on the issue.

Musgrave suggested that perhaps some "creative legislation" could do the trick, but no clear path of action was

obvious.

Also discussed were the impacts of illegal immigration. Dairy farmer Chris Kraft, of Fort Morgan, pointed out to Musgrave and Udall that the agricultural community is already facing labor shortages and problems, and that new crackdowns on illegal immigrants could result in even bigger problems.

"We need a way to get more workers in so we know who they are. Right now, we have a way to get people in but you don't know who they are," Kraft said.

He went so far as to equate agricultural issues with national security, and Musgrave nodded, saying, "It is, it is."

Said Musgrave, "The whole economy is dependent on agriculture... We want to make sure our farmers can stay in business despite years of hardship."

At the same time, both Musgrave and Udall tried to buoy the situation with victories they'd had, such as a bill Musgrave introduced to more than double the direct payment on wheat from 52 cents per bushel to \$1.20.

Udall mentioned a resolution he introduced designed to give ranchers and farmers a tax break by clarifying they do not have to pay self-employment taxes. And both, along with most of Colorado's congressional delegation (with the exception of Republican Doug Lamborn, CD-5, and Democrat Diana DeGette, CD-1), signed a letter asking Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi to consider including 20 Colorado counties affected by blizzards this past winter for relief under the coming Emergency Supplemental Appropriations measure.

"Things look wonderful in Colorado for this wheat crop, and what a relief after years and years of drought," Musgrave commented. "I'm feeling very, very positive."

Udall also predicted that the burgeoning renewable energy industry will help to "revitalize" rural parts of the state.

"It's an exciting time for rural America. The benefits [of the renewable energy industry] are going to be enormous," Udall said.