

## **Veterinarian holds key post among Senate Republicans Ensign tasked with returning GOP control of Senate in '08**

R. SCOTT NOLEN  
April 15, 2007

Dr. John Ensign's job in the Senate is, arguably, one of the toughest. As chair of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, a position for which he was chosen following the November elections, the Nevada lawmaker is responsible for taking back the Senate from the Democrats in 2008.

For this to happen, Republicans will need to wrest away two Senate seats from the Democrats, or just one if a Republican wins the White House. (The vice president is the Senate president and casts the deciding vote in a 50-50 tie.) Moreover, the GOP must also defend 21 Senate seats, compared with the Democrats, who have to hang onto 12.

The goal of the NRSC is to elect Republican incumbents and challengers. The committee goes about this primarily through fundraising but also by promoting candidates and providing research and campaign strategy planning. Dr. Ensign's counterpart among the Senate Democrats is Charles Schumer of New York. Schumer raised a record \$119 million during the 2006 election cycle, and Dr. Ensign has set the same fundraising goal for Senate Republicans in '08.

"Obviously, Republicans learned a lot from the last election cycle," said Rebecca Fisher, NRSC communications director. "We're looking at (this election cycle) as a clean slate, and we have a lot of work to do. We've got an uphill battle; luckily for us, we've got a great leader, and we're optimistic."

Regardless of how the '08 Senate elections play out, for a veterinarian to be elected by his colleagues to the NRSC chairmanship is a matter of pride for the veterinary profession, according to Dr. John Melcher, who represented Montana in the Senate and is one of just three veterinarians to serve in the U.S. Senate.

Dr. Ensign is the first veterinarian to be elected chair since the committee was founded in 1916. Not only is it one of the top posts among Senate Republicans, the chairmanship can be a stepping-stone. At least two recent committee chairmen went on to be elected leader of their party: Bill Frist of Tennessee, now retired, and the current minority leader, Mitch McConnell of Kentucky.

"We should be very proud of Senator Ensign because his Republican colleagues have great confidence in him and have voted him to this post in the Republican leadership," said Dr. Melcher, who now consults for the AVMA's Washington, D.C., office.

Dr. Ensign has gained higher status and recognition than any veterinarian elected to Congress, Dr. Melcher noted. Fisher of the NRSC agreed, saying that Dr. Ensign works closely with Sens. McConnell and Trent Lott, the minority whip. "His stature has absolutely grown with this position, but he was already certainly a leader within the party on issues and the direction the party is heading," she said.

Last November, even though the GOP lost its majority in Congress, Dr. Ensign fended off a challenge from Jack Carter, son of former President Jimmy Carter, to win a second Senate term. Later, he was re-appointed to four committees: Armed Services; Budget; Commerce, Science and Transportation; and Veterans Affairs.

"Senator Ensign's convincing win in a difficult year for Republicans reinforces his popularity with the people of Nevada, who sent him back to Washington for six more years," observed Dr. Mark Lutschaunig, director of the AVMA GRD.

Not long after receiving his DVM degree from Colorado State University in 1985, Dr. Ensign opened the first 24-hour animal hospital in Las Vegas. From 1995-1999, Dr. Ensign was a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, and in 2000 he was elected to the Senate.

During his first term in the Senate, Dr. Ensign wrote the Animal Drug User Fee Act, making the speedy marketing of new animal drugs possible. He also authored the Captive Wildlife Safety Act, which prohibits the interstate shipment of exotic animals. After Hurricane Katrina struck the Gulf Coast, Dr. Ensign took the lead in urging an immediate and coordinated federal rescue effort for abandoned pets.

In 2005, the Humane Society of the United States named Dr. Ensign its Legislator of the Year in recognition of his work in Congress as an animal welfare advocate.

The senator has, however, parted ways with the AVMA by backing legislation that would ban horse slaughter for human consumption. The AVMA says the bill doesn't adequately address the welfare of horses that, for various reasons, are no longer wanted by their owners. But despite the occasional differences, the AVMA won't let them get in the way of working with Sen. Ensign in the 110th Congress.

"We look forward to working with Senator Ensign and his staff in the 110th Congress. While we occasionally disagree on certain issues, we are all in agreement about the importance of the veterinarian's role in animal health and welfare," Dr. Lutschaunig said.