

Is Henry Perea's ag committee assignment promotion or punishment?

By John
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Assembly Member Henry T. Perea, D-Fresno, right, talks with state Sen. Lou Correa, D-Santa Ana before a 2014 water bond rally in Sacramento in January.

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There was a time when chairing the Assembly's agriculture committee was a coveted post, but the position no longer has the star power associated with committees such as appropriations, governmental operations — or insurance.

Last week, new Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins appointed Fresno Democrat Henry T. Perea to head the ag committee. His last chair assignment: insurance.

The appointment has people wondering: Is it a promotion? Punishment? Or just Atkins doing what any incoming

speaker would do by putting her mark on the Assembly?

Richard Lehman, the former lobbyist, congressman and state legislator from the Valley, sees the glass half full: “If you wanted to run for higher office in the Valley, like Congress, it would be good to be ag chairman and have the dairymen coming to you. There’s always that. Being from the Valley, it doesn’t hurt to be on the ag committee.”

Perea, 37, is termed out after this two-year Assembly term, so conjecture about his next political destination isn’t premature. Many say he should be looking to run for Congress next. But Fresno Democrat Jim Costa narrowly won re-election last month for his sixth term and has shown no signs that he’ll step down.

Last summer, Perea stepped out of the Democratic line to push for a three-year delay putting transportation fuels under the cap-and-trade program, a proposal that is expected to increase gas prices in the state. The change starts Jan. 1.

“It was clear to me he was bounced out because he was pushing that bill that urban liberals did not like,” said Tony Quinn, a longtime political analyst in California and former Republican legislative aide.

With almost every vote now only needing a simple majority, given the Democrats majority in the statehouse, Quinn and others say Atkins can afford to ignore or even punish Perea and others who are moderates. The more liberal, largely urban contingent that makes up the bulk of the Assembly’s Democratic caucus can do its work almost unhindered by not only Republicans, but also moderate Democrats.

Maybe the reason is deeper. Perea, entering his third and final term, represents the old guard. New Assembly members are under new term-limit rules that allow them to keep their seat for twice as long — 12 years. Some of these members would benefit from a high-profile chairmanship, especially one like insurance, which brings in lots of campaign contributions. It could help them build their star power and their campaign accounts in this new political era.

Perea has around \$1 million in his campaign account.

Former Assembly Member Sarah Reyes of Fresno said Perea’s moderate stance and short time left in the Assembly work against him. She added a third strike: “He’s from an ag district.”

Perea couldn’t be reached for comment, but when the appointment was announced this month he said in a news release that he was “honored to be named chairman of the Assembly Committee on Agriculture” and that Fresno County was the nation’s breadbasket. California produces nearly half of all U.S.-grown fruits, nuts and vegetables.

Lehman, Quinn and others said the agriculture committee isn’t what it used to be. Quinn noted that the water, parks and wildlife committee — not agriculture — has say over water, a critical issue of statewide importance. Lehman recalls moving from the agriculture to the water committee when he was in the Assembly because “that’s where the action was.” And Lehman said another big issue, pesticides, was largely taken from the agriculture committee when Pete Wilson was governor. On top of that, some touchy bills that could pit urban legislators against their rural colleagues may end up in the agriculture committee.

“Is the ag committee coveted?” Reyes asked rhetorically. “No, nobody wants it. Nobody wants to be that person.”

Still, there is a belief that Perea can make what he wants of the agriculture committee.

“He could do a lot with it, and have an impact — but he must do it in two years,” Reyes said, referring to the tight time frame before Perea is termed out.

Barry Bedwell, president of the California Fresh Fruit Association in Fresno, is optimistic not only about Perea’s tenure as agriculture committee chairman, but also of Atkins. He said she has “reached out on numerous occasions” to agriculture. He said the importance of individual committees waxes and wanes with each speaker, and in this case, he thinks Atkins and her chief lieutenants will route important ag-related bills through the agriculture committee.

“We think that, to the contrary, this speaker probably brings added importance to the position,” Bedwell said.

Important legislation involving pesticides and invasive species will likely come up this session, and Bedwell said they could find their way to Perea’s committee. It’s even possible that some water and labor bills might come before Perea.

“With Henry’s position and background and being from Fresno, I certainly feel positive about this appointment,” Bedwell said.

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