

LAKEFIELD STANDARD

## Local lawyer leads top ag minds

By Justin R. Lessman (February 20, 2014)

A Lakefield attorney has been charged by 900 of the brightest minds in agricultural law with ensuring they remain on the cutting edge of research, scholarship and practice.

Pat Costello, longtime Lakefield lawyer and a partner in the Costello, Carlson and Butzon law firm, is serving this year as president of the American Agricultural Law Association, an organization of academics, government officials and attorneys dedicated to the independent investigation of how laws affect farmers and ranchers. As president-elect in 2013, Costello was given the task of planning the association's annual conference, a colossal commission involving the assembly of around 50 expert presenters.

"The expectation is that each speaker be the expert in his or her respective field — the person who knows more about the topic at hand than anyone else in the United States," Costello said.

The challenge of lining these folks up to speak at the 2013 convention last fall in Madison, Wis., was eased by Costello's long involvement in the association. He joined the association in 1982, a year after its formation, and has attended every annual conference.

"Over the years, you get to know the experts and gain knowledge of areas of expertise and continuing research," Costello said.

With the convention behind him and his transition to the presidency complete, Costello is now charged with overseeing the association's 12-member board of directors, presiding over the 2014 convention and — most importantly — providing leadership and direction.

"It has always been my intention to ensure we see what is coming over the horizon — to get ahead of the next issue before it is upon us," Costello said.

Costello remembers hearing about Roundup Ready soybeans at an AALA convention three years before the product was introduced to growers.

"This was revolutionary at the time," Costello said.

Costello and his fellow members were introduced to robotic milking machines well in advance of their commercial availability and were studying the possible legal implications of genetically modified organisms long before the acronym GMO was a kitchen-table term.

And it was Costello himself who introduced the association to the impending animal rights/animal welfare movement years before it surfaced.

"Six years ago, I suggested to the leadership that this issue be one we become aware of," Costello said. "I saw it had very real potential of becoming an issue very important to American agriculture."

He was right, and Costello attributes his rise within the ranks of the association to that vision.

"Up to that point, I was considered by many in the association as the federal estate and gift tax guy," he said. "That was the focus in my career and, really, why I got involved in the group in the first place — to gain knowledge in that area." In fact, Costello has spoken at previous annual conferences on the topic.

“But my push for a conversation regarding animal rights and animal welfare years before the issue broke, I think, really allowed me to become a permanent fixture in the organization,” he said.

In the association’s 33-year history, the presidency has most often fallen to academics, with fewer than 10 practicing attorneys being elevated to the prestigious post. Interestingly, of those few, three — including Costello — have hailed from Minnesota.

Costello sees on the horizon today two primary areas of concern: antibiotic restrictions and issues relating to packing plant concentration.

“I do foresee a movement to attempt to restrict antibiotic use only to the treatment of disease or illness and not as a growth-enhancer,” he said. “And issues related to the concentration of packers are just over the horizon. These are things we, as an association, need to be aware of because these are things the people we serve will be facing in the near future.”

After all, Costello says, that is really his driving force — not the respect of top academics, not the prestige of planning a conference or leading a board or presiding over a 900-member organization, but his clients — the people he serves at home.

“Everything I know about agriculture has been taught to me by my clients — the farmers I represent,” he said. “I have practiced law on Main Street of my hometown for 36 years, serving my friends and neighbors — many of whom are farmers — and have enjoyed every bit of it.”