

Decisions, Decisions

A new humane PAC focuses on electing animal-friendly candidates



► **By Simone Szaraval**

Election season is upon us. Whatever your personal passions – the war in Iraq, the economy, the myriad social issues – it’s a safe bet that if you’re reading this magazine, you are at least somewhat concerned about animals!

With attacks and counterattacks from political ads and divergent opinions from experts flooding the airwaves, how do you go about casting a vote for the candidates who will address the matters you care about most? For animal lovers, one way is to log on to www.humaneusa.org.

Founded in 1999, Humane USA aims to do what none have done before: rally animal welfare and protection supporters (and, they hope, voters!) into a powerful lobbying force. Guns have their

representatives, as do minorities, religious interests, and big business. Not to mention the well-funded, highly vocal hunting and farm industry PACS. Even Ringling Bros. circus has an active lobby. They contribute money and target candidates that they want in or out of office. But animal welfare people have been woefully unrepresented in the hallowed halls of Congress.

“Public policy is an important area for the animal protection movement and we’ve been at a disadvantage by not having any apparatus that could be used when elections came around,” explains Wayne Pacelle, co-founder of Humane USA.

Although there have been some PACs at state levels, Humane USA is the first major national animal political action committee.

Why has it taken so long?

“Traditionally, the leaders of the humane movement come from charitable organizations, which are prohibited from engaging in election activities,” explains Humane USA chairman Michael Markarian. “Charities can’t support candidates. They can’t donate money to political causes. So there was this real void in the animal movement. Humane USA was formed by leaders of many of those groups but is not affiliated with any of them. We can all participate as individuals and as volunteers. And the animal movement can be involved and can contribute to candidates that support animal causes. We can work to get them elected or help get them out of office. It’s taken our social movement to a whole new level.”

With its membership growing, they’ve already united the public to help achieve some important victories.

Sacramento, California, might be the hub of the state’s government but it also includes some rural areas. In the third Congressional district, state senator Rico Oller had his eyes on the U.S. Congress. It’s an entrenched district, which means that whoever wins the seat tends to keep it for a long time.

“He was the most hostile person to animal issues that you could imagine,” says Markarian. “He was against a bill to provide basic standards of care for dogs in puppy mills; against putting a bitter agent in antifreeze to protect both animals and children; against strengthening penalties for illegal animal fighting. Personally, he engaged in hound hunting of bears. He had been so horrible at the state legislature that we could not let him get into Congress because he’d be a nightmare for animals.”

So Humane USA rallied support and went door to door to talk about Oller and his views. He lost the race.

“Voters have no guidance on how candidates stand on animal issues,” says Pacelle. “A lot of them consider care for animals a number one concern in their lives.”

Humane USA’s goal is to reach out to voters and let them know the candidates’ views about animal protection.

For example, their “humane scorecard” details every representative’s and senator’s voting record on animal issues. If a newcomer doesn’t have an established record, Humane USA sends them a questionnaire, and publishes their responses on the website.

Party affiliation doesn’t factor into the equation.

“We are absolutely non-partisan,” says Markarian. “We look at one thing and one thing only: animal issues. We have many Republicans, Democrats, and Independents that we’ve endorsed. All of them are beginning to recognize that we can bring people across party lines on animal issues. We don’t care how competitive the race, what party the candidate belongs to, we will help the person that is more friendly to animal protection.”

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In the election horse race, here are some of the candidates Humane USA is backing:

Louisiana: Democratic congressman Chris John is running for the open U.S. Senate seat. Humane USA’s Michael Markarian calls him “every animal lover’s nightmare ... an active proponent of the cockfighting industry, which he has called ‘a cultural, family-type’ activity. He voted for the use of steel-jawed leg hold traps on wildlife refuges, for the killing of Yellowstone’s buffalo with taxpayer dollars, and for nearly every other anti-animal position in the Congress.”

Humane USA is endorsing either John Kennedy, another Democrat, or David Vitter, a Republican.

Texas: Humane USA is working to defeat Charlie Stenholm, the ranking Democrat on the House Agriculture Committee, where, with financial backing from the cattle industry, he has been the leading voice against a bill to stop sick animals being from dragged with chains into slaughterhouses. Stenholm works against virtually every animal protection issue to come before Congress.

Humane USA is backing Republican Randy Neugebauer.

Alaska: Sen. Lisa Murkowski inherited her seat from her father, who left the job when he was elected the state’s governor. But, says Markarian, Murkowski is no friend to animals. She consistently opposes pro-animal legislation. Opposing her this fall is Democrat Tony Knowles, a former governor of the state.

Humane USA is backing Knowles despite his support of oil drilling in Alaska’s Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

South Dakota: Senate minority leader Tom Daschle (D) has “traditionally been very good from a state you wouldn’t necessarily think had a lot of pro-animal sentiment,” says Markarian. Daschle is facing tough competition from Republican John Thune, who, says Markarian, was “never a friend” to animals.

Humane USA is backing Daschle.

Missouri: Sen. Kit Bond is running for re-election, but Humane USA labels him “very bad on animal issues.”

Humane USA is backing Nancy Farmer (D) to win.

North Carolina: With John Edwards vacating his Senate seat, Erskine Bowles (D), whom Humane USA considers to be a pro-animal legislator, is running against House member Richard Burr (R), who, they say, has a “bad record” on humane issues. Humane USA is endorsing Bowles.

South Carolina: House member Jim DeMint (R) has been “terrible on animals,” says Markarian. DeMint is facing off against Democrat Inez Tenenbaum, who “responded very favorably to our questionnaire on animal issues.”

Humane USA is endorsing Tenenbaum.

Florida: With Sen. Bob Graham retiring, Democrat Peter Deutsch is running for the open Senate seat. Humane USA calls him “one of the leaders on animal issues, supportive of every animal bill, and active with the Animal Rights Foundation of Florida.”

Humane USA is giving a big endorsement to Deutsch.

That was the case in Washington State when, in 2000, Senate incumbent Slade Gordon met a challenge from Maria Cantwell. Gordon had an exceptionally poor record on animal issues; Cantwell had filled out the questionnaire indicating strong animal welfare support, so the group backed her, sending out a mailer to 80,000 humane advocates. She won by a slim 2,200 votes, but says Markarian, “she really credits Humane USA with helping her win that election.”

Increasingly, candidates are looking to Humane USA for endorsements – and the volunteers and campaign contributions that come with them. Markarian is hoping that the group will have greater standing in the political process as more animal devotees learn about the organization and join in its efforts. There are already chapters in nine states, and they hope volunteers will come on board to start chapters in all others.

This November, along with the presidential race, 435 House of Representatives seats and 33 Senate seats will be up for grabs. It is in Congress, where legislation affecting animals is created, that voters can have enormous impact. The website will carry the group’s endorsements in almost every race, and information about each of the candidates can be obtained on the site. And lest anyone doubt it, every single seat in the House or Senate is vital, since one vote can ultimately mean passage or defeat of pro-animal legislation.

“The more people are engaged in our activities,” says Markarian, “the more candidates want to help and the more they fear our wrath. If we can get people out of office that are hostile to animals, we’ll have established a nationwide reputation as a powerful political force to be recognized and reckoned with.”

Humane USA hopes their work will not only spur animal lovers to get more involved through awareness, voting and volunteering, but hopefully to consider running themselves.



Tom Lantos and Max

On the Hill: Friends of Animals

Co-chaired by congressmen Tom Lantos (D-CA) and Christopher Shays (R-CT), the Congressional Friends of Animals Caucus is a bi-partisan group of 26 like-minded House members.

Lantos says that PACs like Humane USA can help influence races, particularly those where the candidate is not yet established with an entrenched political base.

“We try to get new members to join every year, and we work to identify colleagues that are generally interested in animal welfare issues,” says Lantos. “You get some ultra-conservative Republicans who love animals and will support legislation, and you have ultra-liberal Democrats who support it.”

And then there are those who are not necessarily passionate about animal causes but who may still be willing to support them. Lantos notes that legislators who are passionate about animals are still in a minority, but progress can still be made because much of the business of Congress is conducted through the exchange of favors.

“Everything in Congress is done on the basis of personal relationships. You never have that much success with people who are against your issue, but the majority of the body is usually in-between and persuadable. And relationships in Congress are quid pro quo. You support their bill (unless you’re dead set against), and that’s the only way they’ll say yes to your request when you come looking for their support.”

“We’d like to see people run for office too,” says Pacelle. “We want to have good people stand for elective office and to have a Congress and state legislatures comprised of individuals that have a humane ethic. I’ve seen how much difference people can make. Most or half of Americans who are eligible to vote don’t vote. If people were to write or call elected officials, work on a campaign, volunteer in some other way, they would make a very real difference.

“Because of the general apathy, one person can have a disproportionate impact. If everyone who was concerned with animal issues would get involved, we could take the country by storm.” 🐾

Humane USA has chapters in the following states: Florida, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Virginia, Washington and Georgia. They would like volunteers to join these chapters and are looking for people to start chapters in states where none yet exist. For more information, visit www.humaneusa.org or call (703) 847-0075.

Humane USA’s Best And Worst

We asked Humane USA to provide us with who they think are the 15 best and worst members of Congress when it comes to animal issues. Many are up for re-election this November.

BEST:

- Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA)
- Sen. Tom Daschle (D-SD)
- Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA)
- Sen. Christopher Dodd (D-CT)
- Sen. Russ Feingold (D-WI)
- Sen. Patrick Leahy (D-VT)
- Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV)
- Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR)
- Rep. Ed Whitfield (R-KY)
- Rep. Elton Gallegly (R-CA)
- Rep. Earl Blumenauer (D-OR)
- Rep. Peter Deutsch (D-FL)
- Rep. George Miller (D-CA)
- Rep. Gary Ackerman (D-NY)
- Rep. Chris Shays (R-CT)

WORST:

- Sen. Christopher Bond (R-MO)
- Sen. Jim Bunning (R-KY)
- Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA)
- Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-AK)
- Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH)
- Rep. Randy Cunningham (R-CA)
- Rep. Brad Carson (D-OK)
- Rep. Barbara Cubin (R-WY)
- Rep. Dennis Rehberg (R-MT)
- Rep. Bob Goodlatte (R-VA)
- Rep. John Hostettler (R-IN)
- Rep. Chris John (D-LA)
- Rep. Charlie Stenholm (D-TX)
- Rep. Richard Pombo (R-CA)
- Rep. Don Young (R-AK)