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EDITORIALS

Farmers: Your move

Disastrous tobacco deal highlights leadership void

Sucker punched, Kentucky farmers are reeling from a blow that was all the more debilitating because it came from a supposed member of "the tobacco family."

In the deal to make their legal exposure go away, cigarette companies abandoned positions that farmers and their congressional representatives had long defended for the companies.

The \$368 billion settlement includes payments for "smoking-cessation aids" but not a penny to help rural communities break their economic addiction to tobacco.

The exclusion of farmers is probably all the reason Kentucky's congressional delegation will need to try to thwart the settlement.

But what should farmers be demanding from the deal? And who speaks for rural Kentucky?

.. These are not rhetorical questions. Kentucky agriculture faces a crisis of leadership. Against the settlement backdrop, the vacuum stands out like a full moon on a clear night.

.. Does Gov. Paul Patton speak for agriculture? His idea of rural economic development is a new factory in every county. Kentucky's elected agriculture commissioner's vision ends at the next election.

The Kentucky Farm Bureau historically has taken cues from Philip Morris, which now has thrown in with smoking's enemies to protect a company that minimized its depen-

dence on tobacco, through diversification, long ago.

Of the major farm organizations, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association has shown the most vision, but its leadership is dominated by older farmers and large landowners.

It's the younger generation of farmers whose future is on the line. Who speaks for them?

The Community Farm Alliance is too small to command much attention. The University of Kentucky has the same problems as the Farm Bureau and burley co-op.

Several ideas are floating around for what rural communities should seek from the settlement.

One school of thought wants to preserve the status quo by requiring the companies to keep paying tobacco farmers indefinitely.

Others see this as a chance to let farmers cash out of the troubling business of growing tobacco through a quota buyout.

Still others see a golden opportunity to extract a healthy down payment on a post-tobacco future.

There's considerable overlap among all three viewpoints. But can anyone say with any authority what the Kentuckians with the most at stake want from the settlement? We doubt it, but someone should start listening and speaking up.

Because you can stand stricken at the crossroads for only so long before becoming road kill.

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