

Hyde-Smith is agriculture champion

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In a state where agriculture is such a huge part of its economic and cultural identity, the job of commissioner of agriculture and commerce in Mississippi would seem to be a major office.

In truth, it is mostly regulatory and cheerleading in nature. Farm policy — including all the taxpayer dollars invested in agriculture — is largely determined at the federal level. The state nibbles at the fringes, promoting agriculture but largely having little influence on what farmers grow, how much they grow and what they earn.

The agriculture commissioner's most important function is arguably in the area of consumer protection. The Department of Agriculture and Commerce is responsible for making sure checkout registers ring up the correct price, that motorists get the exact amount of fuel they pay for, that commercial scales are accurate, that food is safe and unadulterated in grocery stores. The agency also has an environmental role in inspecting pesticides and regulating their use.

Voters are being asked this year to select a candidate who can ably replace the retiring incumbent commissioner, Lester Spell.

In the Republican primary Tuesday, the best choice is Cindy Hyde-Smith, a former Democrat who switched parties late last year.

The Brookhaven rancher has been a member of the state Senate since 1999, where she has served as chairman of its Agriculture Committee for the past eight years. She has turned down more glamorous legislative appointments in order to stay focused on an area that has been her passion. She became a favorite of the catfish industry by authoring legislation that requires Mississippi restaurants serving catfish to label the country of origin on their menus.

Hyde-Smith has a reputation as a tireless worker, and she would bring a lot of energy and new ideas to the Department of Agriculture and Commerce.

She is opposed in the primary by Max Phillips of Taylorsville, a retired agriculture educator who is making his third bid for the job, and state Rep. Dannie Reed of Ackerman, a former extension agent.

The winner of the GOP primary will face Democrat Joel Gill and Reform Party candidate Cathy L. Toole in the general election.