What your delegate to Congress has been up to

By Kevin Diaz
Star Tribune Washington Bureau Correspondent

Sen. Mark Dayton

Democrat

Mindful of the death of DFL firebrand Paul Wellstone in October, 2002, Sen. Mark Dayton sought to make an immediate mark in January, proposing 10 bills in 10 days. Results haven't come easily so far.

Parts of two bills on rural health — including higher reimbursements for rural ambulances — made it into a Medicare drug bill, though Dayton ultimately voted against it. He said it did more for the pharmaceutical industry than for seniors.

Incentives he sponsored for ethanol and biofuels became part of a comprehensive energy bill that was blocked in the Senate, largely by Democrats.

A $6 billion farm aid bill he sponsored was shelved in favor of a Republican bill that provided about half that level of assistance.

Four of the 10 bills never made it out of committee. One, to make good on the federal government's commitment to pay 40 percent of special education costs, made it to the Senate floor but failed.

A bill to deny homeland security contracts to companies with overseas tax shelters was passed by the Senate but dropped in negotiations with the House.

Dayton also got attention for a "taste of their own medicine" proposal to give senators the same medical benefits contained in the Medicare drug bill. It was dropped from the final bill.

Dayton remained a staunch critic of the Bush administration's tax cuts and the invasion of Iraq, which he visited this summer. In one bipartisan victory, he joined with Coleman to pass a bill repaying the full airfare home for soldiers on leave from the Mideast.

Sen. Norm Coleman

Republican

Sen. Norm Coleman ended his first year in Congress with several Republican successes to brag about.

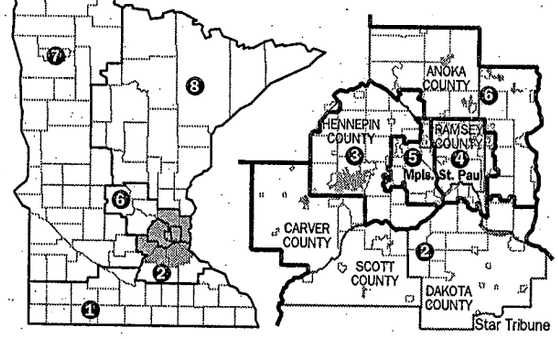
Coleman helped tip the balance in a closely divided Senate to pass a $350 billion tax cut and economic stimulus bill, the new $400 billion Medicare drug benefit and a scaled-down farm aid bill, which provided $200 million to drought- and flood-stricken Minnesota farmers.

Coleman also made a national reputation for himself as chairman of the Senate's Investigations Subcommittee, which he used to spotlight abusive tax shelters, Pentagon travel fraud and Internet music piracy.

He also traveled to Africa to highlight the AIDS pandemic, and to Cuba to discuss trade. Although he campaigned as an advocate of trade liberalization with Cuba, he voted against relaxed travel restrictions, citing recent human rights abuses by Fidel Castro.

In another switch, Coleman said it would be hard to vote against oil drilling in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR) if it was part of an energy bill that provided generous benefits to Minnesota energy producers, including makers of corn-based ethanol. The ANWR provisions were dropped from the energy bill, sparing Coleman a controversial vote.

Minnesota congressional districts



Rep. Gil Gutknecht

R. - First District

Rep. Gil Gutknecht raised his national profile this year as a champion of the right of senior citizens to buy inexpensive prescription drugs in Canada and elsewhere.

His drug reimportation bill ultimately didn't make it into the final Medicare drug bill passed by Congress.

Still, the debate over importing drugs provided some of the year's most dramatic moments in Congress: a series of late-night House votes culminating in a 243-186 decision to open the nation's borders to FDA-approved prescription drugs from abroad.

It was a rare defeat for the nation's pharmaceutical industry.

Similar legislation is now under consideration in the Senate.

The continuing prescription drug battle burnished Gutknecht's credentials as a populist Republican willing to forge his own way in Washington. He railed against the Bush administration's budget deficits and questioned the amount of spending on Iraq war reconstruction.

A member of the Budget Committee, Gutknecht was unique among lawmakers in returning $100,000 of his office budget this year to the general fund, saying, "we try to run a tight ship."

Rep. John Kline

R. - Second District

A freshman, Rep. John Kline came into office in January promising to focus on defense issues and national security. In his first year, he has been true to his word.

The retired Marine colonel saw his first bill glide through Congress and land on the president's desk for his signature. Called the Heroes Act, it allows soldiers to put off student loans while they're on active duty.

Kline has positioned himself as a budget hawk and a champion of the uniformed services. He voted reluctantly for a proposal to end the practice of withdrawing cash food stipends from injured soldiers being fed in military hospitals. While some say the practice is equivalent to making wounded soldiers pay to eat, Kline argued, "it's not that simple."

Kline, appointed to the Armed Services Committee, supported more than $100 million in defense contracts to the state, including a $250,000 grant for the cleanup of a Cold War missile site in Carver County.

Kline was a loyal supporter of President Bush on tax cuts and the invasion of Iraq; he visited Iraq this year.

Rep. Jim Ramstad

R. - Third District

Rep. Jim Ramstad made his biggest policy mark on the Ways and Means Committee, which oversees tax policy, trade, Social Security, Medicare and welfare.

But his labor of love, once again, was championing long-shot legislation to provide health insurance equity for people with mental illness and chemical dependency.

Ramstad, who talks publicly about being a recovering alcoholic, received the first annual

Rep. Gil Gutknecht

Rep. John Kline

Rep. Jim Ramstad

Rep. Betty McCollum

Rep. Martin Sabo

Rep. Mark Kennedy

Rep. Collin Peterson

Rep. Jim Oberstar

Sen. Mark Dayton

Sen. Norm Coleman

Paul Wellstone Award this year from a national addiction group to recognize his continuing — and so far unsuccessful — attempts to pass legislation putting dependency and mental illness treatment on a par with treatment for other diseases.

Ramstad also introduced legislation providing incentives for states to end the practice of parents having to give up custody to get mental health services for their children.

On the Tax Committee, Ramstad helped push through the Bush administration's $350 billion tax cut. He also helped write some of the renewable-fuel provisions in the pending energy bill, which Congress did not complete.

On health care, he sponsored parts of the Medicare bill that would create a demonstration project for care of the frail elderly.

Ramstad, an ardent free trader, served on the GOP whip team this year to win passage of trade agreements with Singapore and Chile.

Rep. Betty McCollum

D. - Fourth District

One of Rep. Betty McCollum's signal achievements in Congress this year might have been a symbolic one: The 416-0 passage in March of her resolution calling the stoning of women a "gross violation of human rights."

In her second term, the St. Paul Democrat has broadened her horizons globally. And her fights have not been only symbolic.

She angered many Hmong activists in her district by sponsoring legislation normalizing trade relations with Laos, a move she says could ease repression in that country.

She also sponsored provisions in Bush's $15 billion African AIDS bill that would focus spending on AIDS orphans.

McCollum was the only member of the Minnesota House delegation to vote against a ban on a late-term abortion procedure. (Rep. Martin Sabo didn't vote).

She made common cause with Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., to increase funding for AmeriCorps and double the number of Peace Corps volunteers.

A critic of the Bush administration's handling of the reconstruction of Iraq, where she traveled this year, McCollum signed a letter in June taking the administration to task for failing to safeguard Iraqi nuclear facilities that were reportedly looted after the war.

McCollum, only the second woman to serve in the House from Minnesota, attained several party leadership posts, including regional party whip.

Rep. Martin Sabo

D. - Fifth District

Mixing long-time labor credentials with his new role as the top Democrat on a Homeland Security appropriations panel, Rep. Martin Sabo engineered a surprising victory this year by tying a $3.2 billion airline bailout to a freeze on executive salaries.

"Each of us understands the meaning of shared sacrifice," he said, noting that the airline industry, rocked by terror concerns and war, was cutting worker salaries and jobs.

Sabo also denounced proposed cuts in the federal air marshal program, and complained that Congress failed to require the screening of air cargo that goes into the holds of passenger aircraft.

Sabo was an outspoken critic of the war in Iraq. As the U.S. invasion began in March, he declined to vote for a House resolution expressing support for the troops, saying it went too far in praising President Bush. The resolution passed 392-11.

He introduced a national same-day voter registration bill, although Minnesota Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer testified in Congress against it.

Sabo, in his 13th term, steered millions of dollars of transportation projects into the state, including $75 million for the Hiawatha Light Rail line.

Rep. Mark Kennedy

R. - Sixth District

While Congress debated raising the gas tax for new highway construction, Rep. Mark Kennedy rolled out a plan to put toll lanes on interstates.

Kennedy's bill would repeal a federal ban, allowing states to set up tolls in new FAST lanes (for Freeing Alternatives for Speedy Transportation). The tolls would end when the projects are paid for.

Kennedy's idea has been criticized as a "Lexus lanes" proposal, since it would allow motorists to opt out of traffic snarls by paying for the privilege. Kennedy counters that it would improve life for everybody, since it would raise highway funds and reduce congestion on nontoll lanes.

Kennedy has remained an enthusiastic supporter of the invasion of Iraq, which he visited this year. He was also a cosponsor of a bill guaranteeing that soldiers' full travel expenses home for rest are covered.

Kennedy was a strong supporter of this year's Medicare bill and a $350 billion tax cut.

Rep. Collin Peterson

D. - Seventh District

Rep. Collin Peterson played his most prominent role of the year by providing a crucial vote for a Republican-backed Medicare bill, which passed the House by five votes.

Although the dead-of-the-night vote didn't endear him to Democrats, he said it could help bring millions of dollars to rural hospitals in his northwest Minnesota district.

Peterson, a conservative Democrat, is used to playing on the margins of the partisan divide.

He also alienated some Republicans by championing a balanced-budget plan and criticizing the Bush budget deficits. That's a stand that's popular on Main Street, he says.

At the same time, Peterson went to bat this year for a federal program that subsidizes airline service to small towns.

A member of the House Intelligence Committee, Peterson said he now spends two-thirds of his time in top-secret oversight duties involving the war on terrorism.

But staying true to his small-town roots, he found time this year to sponsor a bill aimed at cutting the record-keeping costs for the beef and pork industry in complying with mandatory country-of-origin labeling.

Rep. Jim Oberstar

D. - Eighth District

Rep. Jim Oberstar battled the Bush administration on familiar turf: Transportation funding that is critical to his northern Minnesota district.

While Congress spent millions this year on Minnesota transit projects, Oberstar complained that it was far less than needed. He blamed "irresponsible tax cuts for the wealthy," which he and most other Democrats opposed.

One of Oberstar's major legislative efforts involved passage of a $3.2 billion airline industry rescue bill. It passed with bipartisan support.

At the same time, Oberstar engaged in a partisan battle against what he said was an attempt by the administration to privatize the nation's 15,000 air traffic controllers.

In what is likely to remain a contentious issue, Oberstar, the top Democrat on the House Transportation Committee, said he was considering an increase in the federal gas tax to help pay for a six-year, $375 billion highway and transit bill. Bush opposes any gas tax increase.

Oberstar also launched a bill this year dubbed the Hometown Values Agenda. It would produce grants to promote walkable and bikeable communities. He is also seeking more funds to improve end-of-life care for the elderly, and public works projects to create jobs.

Kevin Diaz is at kdiaz@mcclatchydc.com.