



LAS CRUCES - A native Las Cruces has been sworn in as an undersecretary for the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Edward Avalos, 57, took the oath of office last week in a ceremony in Las Cruces. Avalos said he and his wife will begin their cross-country trip to Washington, D.C., today. He officially starts his new job as undersecretary for marketing and regulatory programs on Monday.

"It's a tremendous challenge, and I think it's a tremendous opportunity where I can continue as a public servant to do something for agriculture," he said in a phone interview. "It's not just a great opportunity for me, but for New Mexico to have one of their own in Washington."

Avalos said he'll have a perspective on agriculture from a western state, a benefit to New Mexico "because agriculture in the West is different from other parts of the country, and I can understand the needs of this part of the country."

As overseer of marketing and regulatory programs, Avalos will be one of seven undersecretaries in the department. Within his purview will be the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, aimed at protecting against exotic animal and plant pests and diseases; the Agricultural Marketing Service, which provides standardization and testing for certain commodities; and the Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration, which promotes marketing of livestock, cereals and meat, as well as fair trade practices.

The division employs 14,187 people and has a 2009-10 operating budget of \$1.04 billion, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Avalos has been involved in agriculture throughout his life. He said grew up on farm owned by the Simpson family west of Las Cruces, where he and his family worked. Crops grown there, included cotton, alfalfa, sorghum, chile and onions. The Simpsons also operated a feedlot.

"As a kid, I was exposed to agriculture, and I worked in agriculture, and then as an adult, you understand what's required by a family farm to be successful," he said.

Las Cruces-area pecan grower Greg Daviet, also president of the Do-a Ana County Farm and Livestock Bureau, said he doesn't know much about Avalos, but "anytime we have New Mexico representation at the federal level is a plus."

Avalos attended New Mexico State University, earning an undergraduate degree in agriculture in 1974 and a master's degree, also in agriculture, in the mid '80s. He was first employed with the Texas Department of Agriculture and then hired at the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. His career at both agencies revolved around ag marketing.

Had he not accepted the undersecretary position, Avalos would have reached his 30-year anniversary with the New Mexico ag department next March. He said he feels his greatest accomplishment there was setting up a system to benefit producers, processors, shippers, retailers and consumers - all needed components.

"No matter who comes in after me, the mechanism is in place where they can provide support to the ag industry," he said. "That didn't exist when I first came to work at the N.M.D.A."

Avalos was first nominated in April but had to be confirmed by the Senate. That took place two weeks ago, and he was sworn-in Wednesday by U.S. Magistrate Judge Carmen Garza at the state agriculture department office in Las Cruces.

Avalos said he doesn't have any specific immediate goals for his new job.

But more generally, he said, "I'll carry out the mandate, the statutes and do the best I can to address the needs of all stakeholders in agriculture and also address the needs of my staff at the U.S.D.A."

His last official day with the New Mexico ag department is Oct. 31.