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DJ UPDATE:US Sen Lincoln To Chair Senate Agriculture Panel

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(Adds details on Sens. Lincoln and Harkin.)

By Martin Vaughan and Corey Boles

OF DOW JONES NEWSWIRES

WASHINGTON (Dow Jones)--U.S. Senate Democrats picked two new committee chairmen Wednesday, as Sen. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas will head the Agriculture Committee and Sen. Tom Harkin of Iowa will lead the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, or HELP, Committee.

The shuffle in chairmen was set off by the death of Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass. Harkin will fill the vacancy left by Kennedy at the HELP Committee. He in turn will hand over his Agriculture Committee gavel to Lincoln, who for the first time was elevated to head a full committee.

Lincoln is a two-term moderate Democrat who described herself Wednesday as a "farmer's daughter." She has had a hand in business and tax legislation from her seat on the Senate Finance Committee, including as a member of a small bipartisan group that has sought to raise the estate-tax exemption on behalf of family-owned farms and businesses.

Lincoln said Wednesday that she wants the farm panel under her tenure to have a strong role in international trade and in reviewing climate change legislation.

She said there needs to be much closer scrutiny of derivatives trading as part of a wider rewrite of financial regulatory reform. Lincoln said she believes there "a very small narrow place" for over-the-counter derivatives, but didn't define precisely what she meant by that.

"There needs to be more transparency and I hope we would see more regulation ... of derivatives," Lincoln said.

Her appointment as chairman gives her a boost as she tries to hold on to her Senate seat in the 2010 elections.

Lincoln also owes her chairmanship to two other Senate Democrats agreeing to stay put with their current committee chairmanships. Sen. Chris Dodd, D-Conn., said he will remain as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, freeing up the Health Committee spot for Harkin.

Sen. Kent Conrad, D-N.D., who has more seniority than Lincoln on the Agriculture panel, passed up the farm panel perch in order to stay on as chairman of the Budget Committee.

"I think I've got a responsibility to my colleagues to help us devise a strategy to get the debt down," Conrad told reporters. He added that the fact that the Agriculture panel won't have to pass a farm-bill reauthorization for several years was a factor in his decision.

As chairman of the HELP Committee, Harkin will oversee a broad range of federal programs, including labor and wage standards, student loans, pension rules, nutrition programs and medical research.

A staunch advocate for organized labor, Harkin received a 100% vote rating from the Association for Federal, State, County and Municipal Employees in the last Congress. He has led Senate Democratic efforts to pass legislation making it easier for unions to organize.

Harkin played a major role in passing the 1990 Americans With Disabilities Act. He supported the 2001 No Child Left Behind Law and will lead efforts to re-authorize and overhaul it, likely on Congress's plate in 2010.

He at times has been an antagonist to the food industry, seeking to ban sweets and sodas from schools and pushing for stricter nutritional labeling.

Harkin also was instrumental in winning funding for federal research on alternative medicine and natural treatments such as homeopathy, acupuncture and reiki - rankling some in the scientific community. "He has certainly been an advocate for integrative medicine," said Gretchen DuBeau, a spokeswoman for the American Association for Health Freedom, a group representing consumers and practitioners of alternative therapies.

The group wants to ensure that food-safety legislation, now pending before the HELP committee, doesn't adversely affect producers of natural foods and dietary supplements.

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