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Raleigh News and Observer: GOP stars shine at Burr rally  
By VALERIE BAUERLEIN, Staff Writer

SMITHFIELD -- Johnston County

Republicans filled a tobacco warehouse as large as a Wal-Mart on Tuesday night to cheer on Republican Richard Burr in the U.S. Senate race, two weeks before what some described as an election that will be crucial to their way of life. The county party sponsored the rally and served 3,500 plates of hush puppies and barbecue, some to the rock stars of the state's party -- former U.S. senators Jesse Helms and Lauch Faircloth, sitting U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole and Burr.

Dole, who won the last Senate race in North Carolina, hailed the recent decision by Congress to end the federal tobacco price support program as a historic act and thanked Burr, a House member from Winston-Salem, for helping make it happen.

Dole and Burr devoted much of their remarks to the buyout and its effect on Johnston and other eastern North Carolina counties, seen as key in the Nov. 2 election.

The farmers in the crowd said they appreciated the buyout but didn't see it as a deciding issue in the campaign. They were more concerned about social issues, such as gay rights and abortion.

Frank Lee, the tobacco grower who helped organize the rally, said his greatest worry was the makeup of the U.S. Supreme Court and the likelihood that the next president and U.S. Senate would set the values for his children.

Lee's preacher, Freddie Langston of Stewarts Chapel Pentecostal Holiness Church, gave an invocation that asked forgiveness for calling homosexuality an alternative lifestyle when it was an abomination. He also asked forgiveness for calling killing a matter of choice, a reference to abortion.

"Forgive us for standing idly by and letting man take the prayer out of schools," Langston prayed. "Our children are not allowed to pray, but our prisoners in our overcrowded prisons are."

The invocation and remarks on values had Audrey Norris nodding. She started voting Republican during the Jimmy Carter years, strictly on candidates' views on gay rights and abortion.

"I'll vote against them no matter the party," Norris said.

The room bustled all evening but was silent when Helms spoke.

Helms, 83, who has suffered health problems in recent years, stayed seated. He told the audience it might be his last visit to Johnston County and asked for a favor: "Will you please go out and work as hard as you ever did for me for this good, conservative Christian man?"

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