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# Opinion

## Editorial Board

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## OUR VIEW



Paul Sancya/Associated Press

**A** Dear Mr. President-elect: Congratulations on your victory. Those of us involved in Western agriculture look forward to working with you and your administration in the coming years. Before you take office, though, we thought it would be a good idea to discuss some of the many issues facing you that impact agriculture. We know we can't expect you to solve all of them immediately — most are holdovers from previous administrations — but we hope that in due time you will be able to work with Congress to make progress on them.

Here they are:

### Environmental Protection Agency

If there's a runaway freight train in the federal government, the EPA is it. The Waters of the U.S. regulations, which EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers co-wrote, is an example of rule-making gone wild. A simple concept — don't pollute water that goes directly into lakes, rivers and streams — has been transformed into a nightmarish regulation that has farmers, ranchers and others wondering whether even mud puddles are now under the purview of the EPA.

Added to the EPA-funded attack on Washington state farmers called What's Upstream, in which federal tax money went toward smearing farmers and pushing a bill in the state legislature, the EPA has clearly lost sight of its mission, which is to keep air and water clean.

### Trade issues

Trade is the bread and butter of agriculture, particularly in the West. While you correctly identified weaknesses in the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, that doesn't diminish the importance of trade. Upwards of 90 percent of the wheat grown in the region, one-third of the apples, most of the almonds and hazelnuts and much of the dairy products, beef, pork, chicken, cherries, grass seed and many other crops are sold overseas. Whatever flaws that exist in treaties have to be weighed against those benefits.

At the same time, we understand the objections of those who say jobs have been exported, but our hope is that they can be addressed without damaging the export trade so important to the region's producers.

Another concern for agricultural exporters is the West Coast container port slowdown last year that crippled trade for nearly six months and cost the U.S. economy billions of dollars. That a single union was allowed to trash importers and exporters is an

abomination. We urge you to work with Congress to avert a repeat of that crisis.

### Immigration

Immigration reform has long been a concern for agriculture, especially those farmers, orchardists and nursery operators who depend on foreign-born workers for harvests and field work.

During the campaign you scared the heck out of both farmers and immigrants when you said you'd round up all 11 million illegal immigrants and deport them.

Since the election you have tempered your remarks to say that illegal immigrants who have been convicted of felonies will be a priority for deportation.

The H-2A visa guestworker program is also in dire need of

He, or she, must also be familiar with large-scale agriculture and niche farming such as organics to set priorities that benefit all producers. The fact that the U.S. Forest Service is part of the USDA also must be remembered. National forests were set aside to supply lumber and raw materials to a growing nation, not as parks.

The secretary of the Department of the Interior is an important position for agriculture, too. Because the department and the Forest Service oversee most of the West, how that land is managed impacts ranchers and others who depend on public lands for grazing. The new secretary needs to understand the term "multiple use."

We would like to see national parks fully funded and operating well before the federal government even considers taking any more land as national monuments or parks. Such land grabs are a slap in the face of rural Americans who live and work on the land.

### Food Safety Modernization Act

This law is turning into another example of federal overreach. The regulations promulgated by the Food and Drug Administration made

any grower of a crop that can be eaten raw treat the irrigation water. This is in spite of decades of experience that shows such "problems" don't exist.

### Endangered Species Act

When Richard Nixon signed the ESA into law, the idea was to pull emblematic species such as bald eagles back from the edge of extinction.

That idea has long since given way to the use of the ESA by the environmental industry as a blunt instrument to stop or curb farming, ranching, oil development and mining across the West. Instead of bald eagles, the ESA is used for more than a thousand endangered and threatened plants, birds, frogs and fish that are plentiful in some areas but not in others.

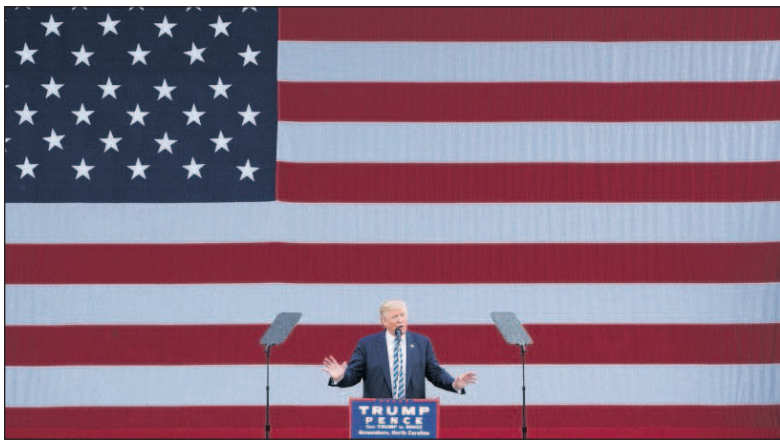
The ESA is now used to manage ranchers and farmers instead of the critters and plants.

The result has been an industry consisting of environmental lawyers who sue the government over missed deadlines and impact studies with the intent of getting a pay day courtesy of taxpayers and stopping economic activity.

The ESA is long overdue for an overhaul that takes into account today's situation, not what was going on a half-century ago.

Those are a few of our concerns and suggestions. Again, Mr. Trump, we wish you the best during your tenure in office.

And if you need any more information, just ask a farmer.



Evan Vucci/Associated Press

Donald Trump has said he will move to resolve many problems impacting agriculture during his term in office.

simplification and revision.

We suggest those be the first steps of an overhaul of the immigration system that would take a close look at the impact immigrants have on agriculture and the rest of the economy.

We continue to believe that those illegal immigrants who have not violated any other laws should be allowed to pay a fine, learn English and receive some type of permanent legal residence status.

Securing the border is part of developing a policy that works, but making sure farmers — and the nation's food supply — aren't sacrificed in the process is more important.

### Department of Labor

The department's use of the "hot goods" order has been especially shocking. When DOL inspectors slap a "hot goods" order on blueberries and demand a confession to wage- and-hour law violations and payment of hundreds of thousands of dollars, they are taking away farmers' rights to due process. "Hot goods" orders were formulated with manufactured goods in mind. Using them for fresh crops should be illegal.

### Appointments

Your new agriculture secretary will signal what the next four years will be like for U.S. farmers and ranchers. Whoever it is must be familiar with the USDA and what its 105,000 employees do, and why.

# What's Upstream-style attacks require new kind of response from farmers

By GERALD BARON  
For the Capital Press

Guest  
comment  
Gerald Baron



**W**hen the EPA-funded What's Upstream campaign came to public attention in early 2016, a group of farmers and farm leaders had already been preparing to meet this new threat head-on. That effort became Save Family Farming, a new nonprofit organization aimed at countering the What's Upstream attack, holding individuals involved accountable, and setting a path for a new kind of pro-farm public strategy.

Farmers and their farm associations have long been strong advocates for farming. The success of farm support legislation and the strong support of the public in general demonstrate that.

But in the past few years, something new has emerged which calls for a new approach to farm advocacy. Environmental nonprofits need new targets to energize their followers and raise funds. "Industrial agriculture" seems to them to fit the bill. The rapidly growing band of environmental lawyers need to cast about for new targets to stay ahead of the competition.

A few tribes, with strong federal support, push treaty rights claims at the expense of farming. Today's media, rocked by continuing audience losses, need the harsh accusations of activists to stoke the outrage they depend on for ratings. Elected representatives, knowing the strong support of younger voters for anything labeled "environmental" are quick to assume accusations in the media are accurate and reflect voter opinion.

Food safety, anti-GMO, farm labor and climate change activists similarly see a juicy target in industrial agriculture. The result is growing public doubt about farmers, conventional farming methods and environmental stewardship.

In this new environment, what has worked in the past is less effective. Backroom relationship building with regulators and elected leaders is necessary, but not sufficient. "Just tell a positive story" doesn't work when opponents effectively place the black hat on farmers. Social media plays powerfully into the mix enabling lies, distortions and accusations to quickly gain momentum.

As President Obama said recently, "People, if they just repeat attacks enough, and outright lies over and over again, as long as it's on Facebook and people can see it, as long as it's on social media, people start believing it. And it creates this dust cloud of nonsense."

In responding to What's Upstream, Save Family Farming has set a new path based on these convictions:

- Be pro-active: The best defense is a good offense.
- Be aggressive: The black hat has to be on somebody — if not farmers, someone else.
- Protect the truth: Lies have to be strongly countered because if repeated often enough they become the truth.
- Secure clout: Politicians operate on "pain avoidance" and therefore must see you

can cause them pain. • Be the broadcaster: Social media and digital communications used correctly provide unprecedented opportunities to reach audiences directly.

• Reach out: The most important audience is the younger urban voter who understands the least about farming but ultimately has the most to say.

• Unify: Without farmers putting aside differences and working together toward a common goal of preserving farming, our effectiveness will be severely limited. Farmers who don't see themselves threatened and don't help protect other farmers may find themselves alone when the attacks come their way.

The foundation of this strategy is environmental stewardship by farmers. If we do not care for the environment and meet the broader community's expectations, our future is in doubt.

Fortunately, most accusations against farmers on environmental topics are massive exaggerations, intentional distortions or outright lies. That's fortunate because the overreach of What's Upstream sponsors such as the Western Environmental Law Center will ultimately harm their credibility with the environmental crowd once their dishonesty is understood.

The vast majority of farmers do care and our biggest challenge is informing a poorly informed electorate and urban voter about the remarkable progress farmers are making in caring for water, habitat, wildlife, land, air and all things environmental. Telling this story effectively is the key to our future survival.

Early on in the process of putting together groups of farmers to lead this kind of effort one farmer said, "We don't know how to do this kind of thing." I replied, "Yes, we do. We just need to do what the activists do." We need to become pro-farm activists. We need a whole army of pro-activists if the future of our farms is to be secured.

For this to happen, farmers, farm supporters and farm association leaders need to clearly understand that we are in a new era and new strategies are required. The support of Save Family Farmers by farm leaders in Washington demonstrates that many are understanding.

Strong, pro-active, unified public outreach is the key to the future of farming. Without meaning to do so, the sponsors of What's Upstream have made that lesson very clear.

*Gerald Baron is the founder and executive director of Save Family Farming, a Washington farm advocacy group focused on responding to attacks on farming such as What's Upstream. Baron is a crisis communication expert with global experience in the energy industry and the author of "Now Is Too Late: Survival in the Era of Instant News."*

### Letters policy

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**Letters policy:** Please limit letters to 300 words and include your home address and a daytime telephone number with your submission. Longer pieces, 500-750 words, may be considered as guest commentary pieces for use on the opinion pages. Guest commentary submissions should also include a photograph of the author.

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