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Opinion

Our View

It's time to free the Hammonds

At the end of their terms presidents typically grant pardons or clemency to a host of federal inmates whose cases are too politically controversial for all but a lame duck to handle.

It's time that President Obama grant Dwight and Steven Hammond clemency and allow them to return to their Oregon ranch.

Ranchers in Oregon's Harney County, father and son have a long history of disputes with the Bureau of Land Management over grazing allotments. Dwight Hammond was convicted of one count related to a fire that burned 139 acres of BLM land in 2006. Steven Hammond was convicted of one count related to the 2006 fire, and a separate count related to a fire in 2001.


Dwight Hammond


Steven Hammond

The Hammonds received a fair trial and were found guilty. Many believe they had just cause to start the fires and deserved no punishment even if they had technically broken the law. The jury found otherwise, and the original trial court handed down fair, and lenient, sentences.

In addition to lengthy probation, Dwight Hammond received six months in prison, his son one year. The original prison sentences were served.

But those sentences ignored the minimum mandatory five-year sentence prescribed by the federal arson statute. The government appealed, the sentences were overturned and the trial court ordered the Hammonds to serve out the remainder of new five-year sentences.

They have been in federal prison for a year.

That's enough.

When the crack cocaine trade was destroying minority communities, Congress was pressed to set a strong deterrent. It used its constitutional authority to remove judicial discretion in sentencing. It worked so well on inner city drug offenders that the concept was applied to a wide range of federal crimes.

That is the law. To quote Dickens, the law is an ass.

We understand the appeal of mandatory sentencing. It's easy, and it demonstrates that criminality won't be tolerated. But the purpose of prosecution is to serve justice. It's not supposed to be easy. Removing judicial discretion to weigh the circumstances does not serve justice, even if in some cases judges err and are too lenient. Sometimes, the cause of justice is served by leniency.

President Obama must think so, too. He's spent the last couple of years speaking out against mandatory sentencing. To punctuate the point, he has granted clemency to drug offenders whose mandatory sentences he has judged unjust and overly punitive given the circumstances of their crimes.

By coincidence, the original judge in the Hammonds' case found a mandatory five-year sentence overly punitive given the circumstances of their crimes.

The Hammonds have served enough time, justice has been served. The president should commute their sentences to time served and send them home.

Our View


Dry beans are harvested in a field near Nampa, Idaho. The state's overall private sector weekly wage is growing at twice the national rate, and the average ag industry wage is increasing even faster.
Sean Ellis/Capital Press

Healthy economy more important than minimum wage

Proponents of higher minimum wages may be disappointed to find out that a robust economy, not governmental fiat, benefits workers most.

Those state legislators and initiative sponsors who supported minimum wage increases in states such as Washington, Oregon and California believed they were helping workers.

They were right, to a point. Jacking up the minimum wage to $11 an hour is fine — if you're not an employer on the edge of breaking even. For employers, hiring fewer people or cutting their hours is the only fiscally responsible option. That, in turn, depresses the economy and hurts workers instead of helping them.

An interesting case study is Idaho, which adheres to the federal minimum wage of $7.25 an hour. While proponents of government-mandated increases might bemoan that fact, the reality is that Idaho workers are doing quite well without their help.

The average Idaho worker earns $18.57 an hour, and the average agricultural worker earns $15.55 an hour. Both are well above the $11 minimum wage required in Washington, $10.25 required in Oregon and $10.50 required in California.

The reason for the disparity is Idaho's robust economy. In Southern Idaho alone, about $1 billion in capital investments have been made during the past several years as national and international companies built or expanded their food processing plants, creating 5,000 jobs, according to the Southern Idaho Economic Development Organization.

Because of the economic expansion, good workers are at a premium. As a result, employers must pay more to get and keep employees.

In other words, a strong economy means higher wages.

Such a basic economic lesson appears to be lost on proponents of higher minimum wages, who believe employers are somehow obliged to raise wages whether or not the market warrants it.

In states such as Washington and Oregon, whose economies are still struggling, legislators are on the prowl for new taxes. The one alternative that doesn't appear to be on the table is reducing state spending to match revenue.

In the meantime, Idaho continues to attract investments by companies that grow the state's economy and reward the state's work force.

Other states would do well to emulate Idaho's model of encouraging market forces instead of hanging more taxes on the economy.

When it comes to growing a healthy economy that benefits workers, the minimum wage is not a major factor.

Readers' views

Balance U.S. milk supply, demand

It has been said that trade agreements over the last two decades have made U.S. dairy a net exporter.

Almost everyone gets caught up in exports thinking exports are a good thing because almost everyone in the supply chain has a window of profitability.

Almost everyone except the dairy farmer, who makes the milk and is told he must compete with a global milk price of $14 per hundredweight or less.

Tami Kerr, executive director of Oregon Dairy Farmers Association, strongly supports exports, stating, "I think it's a no-brainer for us. We're producing more milk than we're consuming."

Instead of making milk in excess of profitable domestic demand and selling it at a loss on the global market, why don't dairy farmers, through their dairy farmer-owned co-ops, simply balance the milk supply with profitable domestic demand and promote U.S. made milk?

The U.S. dairy farmer's goal should be sustainable profitability, not global exports that fail to pay at least what it costs to make the milk.

Dairy farmer: Join and implement National Dairy Producers Organization's policies of balancing the milk supply with profitable domestic demand so that milk has at least the average value of what it costs the average U.S. dairy farmer to make it.

Bob Krucker
NDPO board member
Jerome, Idaho

Dannon doing the right thing

Shiloh Perry from the Farm Bureau questions Dannon's decision to use non-GMO feed for its dairy cows (Guest Comment, "Capital Press," 12/9/16). But Dannon is doing the right thing.

The poison glyphosate, together with its even more poisonous adjuvants, are the dance partners of GMOs. GMO crops exist largely to be drenched with glyphosate.

The glyphosate residues in GMO food and feed likely mimic and replace the essential amino acid glycine in bodily systems causing havoc with health. See "Acres USA," Sept. 2016, page 8, discussing the new study in the "Journal of Biological Physics and Chemistry" linking glyphosate to disease.

Tom Stahl
Waterville, Wash.

The economy: What lies ahead in 2017?

By STEVE SCRANTON
For the Capital Press

Guest comment
Steve Scranton

After living through a campaign season that featured anger and distrust as the primary themes, we may well see hope and uncertainty as the new themes in 2017. The reality is that the economic outlook over the next 12 months is far less certain than in previous 12-month windows due to the results of the U.S. elections and uncertainty about how critical upcoming elections in Europe, especially Germany and France, will shape global policy and global economies.

The recent Federal Reserve move raising the key interest rate by 0.25 percent and the U.S. Dollar Index crowding its all-time high for recent years will continue to put pressure on agricultural commodities that are heavily dependent on exports. The cost of capital sources with interest will increase the cost for producers to hold crops with anticipation of better prices. That, coupled with the uncertainty of possible changes in foreign trade policy, will challenge producers in their marketing strategies.

From a national perspective, the Republican sweep and President-elect Donald Trump's platform suggest prospects for tax cuts and tax reform; increased infrastructure, energy and defense spending; a reduction in the regulations affecting a number of industries; a more restrictive and potentially hostile trade policy; and sooner and faster increases in interest rates if policy changes result in either faster economic growth or faster inflationary growth.

If government remains gridlocked, however, it is unlikely that the economy will break out of the 1.5-2.5 percent growth pattern that has held since the recovery began.

Based on President-elect Trump's platform, these are the major policy areas to watch.

- Tax policy: Reductions in the personal and business tax rates are on the table as well as the potential for a more comprehensive tax reform package.
- Fiscal policy: The focus of President-elect Trump is on infrastructure, energy and defense spending.
- Regulatory policy: President-elect Trump has made it clear that he wants to reduce the role of government and reduce regulations. This holds the potential for major changes to regulations related to financial services, health-care, energy and environment.
- Trade policy: The prospect of a more restrictive and potentially hostile trade policy exists, especially as it relates to Canada, China and Mexico.
- Monetary policy: If policies and actions implemented by Congress and the president result in either faster economic growth or faster inflationary growth, then the Federal Reserve would probably raise interest rates sooner and faster.

Regardless of the political environment, there is one fundamental economic reality that we should not forget. Historically, the average business cycle has lasted 84 months. The current business cycle is into its 90th month. Even with the potential boost from a changed political environment, the reality is that we are closer to the end of this business cycle than the beginning.

Sound risk management practices call for advance preparation; it is best to plan for the next downturn when times are good. As the old Aesop's fable counseled, it is better to be the "ant" and have a plan ready when hard times arise than the "grasshopper" and simply hope that the good times continue. On that note, the best advice I can give is the following:

- Stay focused on your business and what makes you successful, and avoid the noise and distraction of the 24/7 news and information stream.
- Develop your "disaster recovery" plan for when the business cycle ends and the next downturn comes, whenever that may be.

Steve Scranton is the chief investment officer for Washington Trust Bank. He holds a chartered financial analyst designation and has over 30 years of investment experience. Throughout the Pacific Northwest, he is a well-known speaker on the economic conditions and the world securities markets.

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Write to us: Capital Press welcomes letters to the editor on issues of interest to farmers, ranchers and the agribusiness community.

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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