

Optimism wanes in farm country, survey finds

By CAROL RYAN DUMAS
Capital Press

Producer optimism about the agricultural economy is at its lowest level since the 2016 elections, dropping for the second consecutive month in April.

Concerns over trade disruptions and the future of U.S. agricultural exports are fueling the downturn in producer sentiment, according to economists at Purdue University who survey 400 producers nationwide each month.

The needle of optimism on current and future economic conditions fell 10 points in April in the Purdue University/CME Group Ag Barometer after dropping 5 points in March.

Producer sentiment is at its lowest level in about a year and a half, going back to the election period in 2016. Jim Mintert, director of Purdue's Center for Commercial Agriculture, said in a webinar accompanying the latest barometer report. "We've lost a good chunk of the optimism we gained following the election, but we haven't lost it all," he said.

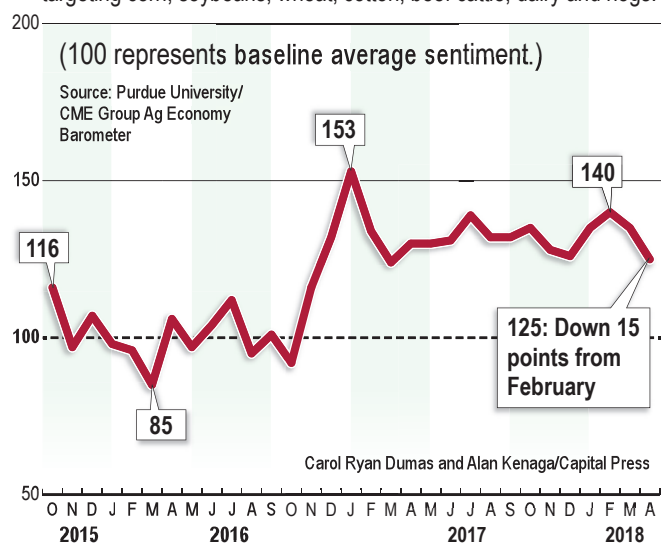
The indices on current conditions and future expectations both turned lower in the last two months and are at their lowest level since May 2017 and March 2017, respectively. But they're not as low as they were before the election.

"There haven't been a lot of times when we've seen both ... indices moving in the same direction in the same month. But we're seeing that now two months in a row," he said.

One of the concerns is about the future of agricultural trade. There's been a significant change in expectations

Farmer sentiment on ag economy

Purdue University and CME Group partnered to develop a tool for tracking farmer's optimism about the U.S. ag economy. The Ag Economy Barometer is an index based on a monthly national survey of 400 producers consistent with USDA Census data and targeting corn, soybeans, wheat, cotton, beef cattle, dairy and hogs.



regarding where exports are headed, he said.

In February, 13 percent of responders expected agricultural exports to decline in the next five years. In April, that jumped to 17 percent.

"A lot of that has to be driven by the discussions of possible disruption to trade, especially to China (and) maybe to a lesser extent (the North American Free Trade Agreement)," he said. "But clearly it's created some uncertainty on the part of producers about what's going to happen."

Pessimism over exports was even higher in their nationwide survey of 100 agricultural thought leaders, such as bankers and retailers. In April, 29 percent of those respondents expected agricultural exports to decline over the next five years.

Producers' concerns over the future of agricultural exports is spilling over into concerns about commodity prices and their expectation of whether the next five years are likely to be "good times." Only 45 percent of respondents in the livestock sector and 38 percent in the crop sector expect good times.

That's a significant decline in optimism in the livestock sector, down from 60 percent a few months earlier, and a slight decline in the crop sector.

The decline in the livestock sentiment is tied to pork prices, which declined significantly over the winter, and the imposition of Chinese tariffs on pork imports from the U.S. In addition, the dairy sector has had significant problems with profitability, he said.

Washington piece-rate pickers must be paid for 'down time,' high court rules

By DON JENKINS
Capital Press

A divided Washington Supreme Court ruled Thursday that piece-rate farmworkers must be paid separately for other job-related tasks, such as mandatory meetings and traveling between fields.

The majority said the decision applied to only farmworkers, but dissenting justices called the ruling an "ambitious re-imagining of Washington" law that will affect non-agricultural employees who aren't paid a straight hourly wage.

"At the end of the day, the majority has simply rewritten the (Minimum Wage Act)," Justice Debra Stephens wrote in the dissent.

The ruling, which upsets traditional agricultural pay practices, stems from a class-action federal lawsuit against Dovex Fruit Co. and its parent company, Stemilt Growers of Wenatchee. U.S. District Court for Eastern Washington Judge Salvador Mendez Jr. referred the question on piece-rate pay to the Supreme Court.

The court heard oral arguments in the case, Carranza v. Dovex, in September. The decision Thursday was the latest of several Supreme Court rulings that have gone against farm operators.

The court's majority opinion suggested that piece-rate workers must be paid separately for meetings, training, traveling between orchards and storing equipment. It also suggested that time spent climbing up and



Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Workers harvest apples in Brewster, Wash. The Washington Supreme Court has ruled that piece-rate workers must be paid for "down time" such as meetings and travel between orchards.

down ladders and emptying bins would not require separate pay.

The majority, however, said precisely setting the scope of so-called "piece-rate down time" will be left to further litigation.

"We're in a bit of a pickle," said Yakima labor attorney Sarah Wixson, whose clients include farmers. Although not directly involved in the case, Wixson co-wrote a brief submitted to the court by the Washington State Tree Fruit Association supporting Dovex.

Farmers should assume the ruling will apply to tasks that all workers spend the same amount of time on, she said. "The risk here is, What is going to bring a class-action lawsuit?"

Wixson said she doubts the ruling will end piece-rate pay. The system attracts the best workers, she said.

She also said that with farms competing for workers, she doesn't foresee piece-

rates declining to offset separate pay for downtime.

Efforts to reach Dovex or its attorney were unsuccessful.

In court, Dovex argued that piece-rates were set high enough to account for non-picking tasks. Dovex said it rounded up piece-rate pay at the end of each week to make sure every worker received at least minimum wage for all hours on the job.

Writing for the majority, Justice Mary Yu said that the practice conceals not paying employees for all hours worked and violates the state's minimum wage law.

Yu said piece-rate workers must be paid at least the state's minimum wage for down time. The decision did not address whether piece-rate workers could sue for back pay.

Justices Charles Wiggins, Barbara Madsen, Steven Gonzalez and Sheryl McCloud joined Yu in the majority.

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Advisor Cami Schumann with State Star Farmer, Zane Black of Raft River FFA.

Middleton FFA Nursery and Landscape Team wins Idaho Career Development Event.

The White House Special Assistant to the President for Agriculture & Agricultural Trade, Ray Starling, addresses the 87th Idaho FFA State Leadership Conference.

Annual conference brings together best of Idaho FFA

In Twin Falls, Idaho, FFA held its 87th State Leadership Conference April 4-7, at the College of Southern Idaho. Over 1,500 FFA members and 300 guests attended six general sessions.

This year's theme was "Overcome," and the retiring state FFA officers challenged Idaho's record-breaking members to move past fears, doubts, frustrations and challenges to set goals and overcome anything in their way!

Highlights of the conference were keynote messages brought by the retiring state officers and impactful guest speakers.

Natalina Sents, an Iowa native and former FFA member, spent time sharing what she learned from a year-long road trip where she visited and interviewed farmers in every state in America. Her message helped members see that those closest to the literal roots of American agriculture have much to share that applied to every single person in the audience.

The President of the United States' Special Assistant for Agriculture and Agricultural Trade, Ray Starling, also brought greetings from the White House and encouraged FFA members to take advantage of the diverse opportunities through FFA. Mr. Starling, a past National FFA Officer from North Carolina, credits his agricultural education teachers and FFA with equipping him to be in The White House today

servicing the interest of American agriculture.

During the week, FFA members competed in Career Development Events, Leadership Development Events, Agriscience Fair, Community Service, Career Success Tours and engaged in leadership workshops from visiting state officers from Kansas, Washington and Oregon. Six new state officers were also elected.

National FFA Secretary, Erica Bauer, from Iowa, shared her message that everyone can find a place in FFA and that we should all be strong advocates for agriculture. She enjoyed her time in Idaho visiting with members and learning more about Idaho.

Along with the events aimed towards student development, attendees gathered at the College of Southern Idaho to celebrate accomplishments by members and supporters such as award presentations, degree ceremonies, and recognition of those who have invested in Idaho FFA. Over \$50,000 in scholarships and awards were presented by the Idaho FFA Foundation through the generosity of donors, the Idaho FFA Foundation Tractor Raffle, and the University of Idaho.

Idaho congratulates its members who won state level events and will compete representing Idaho FFA at the National FFA Convention and Expo in Indianapolis, Indiana, the 24th through the 27th of October.

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