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Opinion

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Our View

Trump trade policies mostly promises

Last week Secretary of Agriculture Sonny Perdue released details of the administration's response to trade damages from retaliatory tariffs by China and other countries.

The plan includes nearly $4.7 billion in direct payments to producers harmed, more than $1.2 billion in government food purchases and $200 million to develop foreign markets.

It is, at best, a stop-gap measure. Assistance checks and government purchases are not a replacement for stable export markets. We urge the administration to make good on its campaign promises and reach fair agreements with our major trading partners.

American farmers and ranchers export $135 billion in products each year. They have a lot riding on trade and are feeling more than a little nervous.

President Donald Trump

One of the central themes of Donald Trump's campaign for the presidency was that the United States was not well served by its many trade agreements.

It was a message that resonated with manufacturers, farmers, union workers and the creators of intellectual property — none of whom can survive without trade, all of whom find themselves perpetually challenged by trade.

People have been complaining about various provisions in the North American Free Trade Agreement since the first President Bush negotiated it and President Clinton signed it. China's manipulation of its currency and its lax enforcement of patents have tested administrations since trade relations opened up in 1979. Dealings with the European Union and its byzantine bureaucracy have always been vexing.

And all of the candidates — Hillary Clinton, Bernie Sanders and Trump — said they'd pull out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the big 12-party deal among all of our big Pacific Rim trading partners, with the exception of China.

It should not have come as a surprise that President Trump sought to redress these grievances.

What has been surprising is that he has chosen to fight all of our best trading partners at once.

We are out of TPP, we've slapped tariffs on China and a host of other partners, NAFTA has been blown apart.

And while he has followed through on his promises to extricate the United States from unfair trade deals, Trump has fallen woefully short on delivering better replacements.

There could be some progress in the offing.

Even as Perdue was announcing the details of the aid package, the president was announcing that the United States and Mexico had reached an agreement to replace NAFTA. It is unclear at this writing whether the Canadians will join in the rewritten agreement.

Nonetheless, the trade situation continues to hang heavy over farmers. They rightfully worry that the trade relationships they have worked so hard to develop will be lost if tensions are not soon eased.

Farmers and ranchers would rather sell to trading partners than receive cash assistance checks.

Our View

Dan Wheat/Capital Press

Antonio de Jesus Bailon picks Gala apples at Griggs Orchards, Orondo, Wash., on Aug. 21. He's in his fifth season as one of 200,000 H-2A temporary guestworkers who will came to the U.S. this year to harvest crops and do other farm work.

H-2A guestworkers help keep ag viable

Two quotes stood out in last week's story about an H-2A guestworker we featured on the front page. One was "I do it because we need the money."

The speaker was Antonio de Jesus Bailon. He was one of more than 20,000 H-2A visa guestworkers hired by orchards in Washington state — and 200,000 hired this year by farmers across the U.S. — to harvest and tend crops.

For many Americans, it's hard to imagine life in rural Mexico, where Bailon grew up. He and his family live on about $10.50 a day he earns picking peas and corn near Francisco Javier Mina, a tiny village halfway between the U.S. border and Mexico city. Compared to the minimum wage he receives as an H-2A worker — $14.12 per hour — it is barely enough for him, his wife and their three children to get by.

The opportunity to come to Washington state to work in the orchards for six months each year is a boon to Bailon and his family. His transportation expenses between Mexico and the U.S. and housing are paid by Griggs Orchards of Orondo, Wash. The only thing he needs to buy is food.

That allows him to bring home about $18,000 in November, when the apple harvest winds down. With that windfall, he is building a house for his family and clothes for his wife and children.

Much is said these days about foreign guestworkers. One comment, that they are "taking" jobs from Americans, is untrue. The 104 H-2A guestworkers Griggs Orchards hired this year are less than half the total crew of 245 it needed, but without them the crops would never be harvested.

Which brings us to a second noteworthy quote in that story:

"There's not a snowball's chance in hell we would get our crops picked without it," John Griggs, co-owner of Griggs Orchards, said of the federal H-2A program.

Even before hiring H-2A guestworkers, employers have to advertise locally for pickers. With the help of organizations such as WAFLA, which recruits guestworkers in Mexico, they are able to fill their ranks. All workers, not just the guestworkers, are paid the federally mandated minimum wage, and those domestic workers who live beyond a 50-mile radius must be offered housing.

The idea that Americans are lining up to harvest tree fruit, row crops and work in processing plants is a fantasy that seems to be perpetuated by politicians and others. During their busy season, nearly every farm and processing plant posts "Help Wanted" signs advertising good-paying jobs only to get a handful of applicants.

Bailon, the guestworker from Mexico, makes about $200 a day picking apples. That comes out to $20 an hour, yet only a limited number of domestic workers apply for such jobs. We have editorialized at length that Congress should address the need for a legal and adequate workforce, not just for agriculture but for other industries. So far, Congress has failed to act in a meaningful way. Instead of streamlining the H-2A program to improve it, congressional proposals have sought to limit the number of guestworkers, reduce the pay and take away housing and transportation.

Such backward thinking will ultimately hurt both the people who do the hard work that Americans won't and the farmers and others who depend on them.

Letters policy

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.

Send letters via email to opinions@capital-press.com. Emailed letters are preferred and require less time to process, which could result in quicker publication. Letters also may be sent to P.O. Box 2048, Salem, OR 97308; or by fax to 503-370-4383.

Defending our right to farm

By AMELIA KENT
American Farm Bureau

Guest comment
Amelia Kentx

Our right to farm is under attack. I'm not talking about attacks from state laws. Think of this in the context of our social license to farm. We see this threat in varying degrees nationwide, but it's something farmers need to face head-on.

In the past few months, there have been 26 lawsuits filed in North Carolina, naming food companies and the local hog farmers they contract with as defendants in cases where the plaintiffs allege the farms are a legal nuisance to the community and unreasonably interfere with their property. Ironically, the plaintiffs are neighbors who moved into the communities of these already-established hog farms. In three of these suits, the juries ruled against Smithfield, putting the farmers out of business and awarding the neighbors several million dollars.

But the neighbors think they're suing Smithfield, the integrator. A group of Texas lawyers instigated this cascade of suits, weaving racial injustice in the mix.

Not long ago, an article crossed my screen titled "Why Do Americans Have Such Contempt for the People Who Feed Them?" If that isn't direct, I don't know what is! Reuben Navarrette Jr., the author, answered "It's weather and dust. The more I think about it, the more I come back to weather and dust. …Those are the things my parents were so desperate to escape when, as pre-teens in the 1950s, they resolved to one day get a job that let them work indoors."

This article was published by the Daily Beast and looked at consumers and farmers in the Central Valley of California, an area that produces more than half the fruits and vegetables for the entire country, with surplus product exported around the world. The author also discusses consumer perceptions of farmers relative to labor shortages and food prices. The common complaint from consumers was that farmers don't pay enough to the workers harvesting their crops. Contrary to perception, the daily wage rate for pickers in this area ranges from $200 to $400 and farmers still have a hard time finding enough workers.

I've read several articles in the past few weeks written from an urban perspective about farming, but more specifically about the people who are the farmers, and the decisions we make. While I appreciate that non-rural people are giving considerable thought to the challenges we face daily, it is very much a dynamic of being on the outside of the fishbowl looking in. We face a unique set of career and industry challenges in agriculture. These challenges are numerous, and across many topics. I once heard of "Special Project Expert" as a job title. I joked about that meaning a jack of all trades and for us, I can't think of a better, single job title!

But here's the thing. Consumers do not understand most of the challenges and struggles we face on a daily basis. But they have the benefit of an affordable food supply — one that is cheaper than it should be and one for which farmers and/or their crops have been vilified. Whether it is biotechnology supposedly causing cancer, regardless of countless other variables, or the carbon footprint of our livestock and the grain they eat enhancing climate change more so than the human impact (the Atlantic published a story saying as much and prompting people to eat beans instead of beef to meet a carbon reduction goal, and some people believe that!), the perception of agriculture as a whole, and the farmers behind the food, is increasingly negative. This is thanks, in large part, to people being increasingly removed from any farm and ranch experience.

Our social license to our livelihoods — our right to farm — is being commandeered by the children and grandchildren of those who chose to leave farms to work in air-conditioned offices. In North Carolina the focus is on hog farms, but poultry farms are not a far reach and are suspected to be in the crosshairs next. This battle is not limited to North Carolina. These social challenges are obstacles for farmers worldwide. Whether you like it or not, we all must add advocacy to the "Special Project Expert" tool box.

Amelia Kent, a member of the American Farm Bureau's current Partners in Advocacy Leadership class and the GO Team, raises cattle and hay with her husband in southeastern Louisiana. You can follow Kent Farms on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram at kentfarms_la. This column was originally published in the August 2018 issue of Louisiana Farm & Ranch.