Blueberry: 'I don't think the administration change will make a difference'

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shouldn't base its trade policy on fears about what smaller countries will do. "Otherwise we're just wimps," he said.

Stumo said he expects the Biden administration to be open to protecting blueberry farmers. "I don't think the administration change will make a difference in this case," he said.

U.S. blueberry farmers produce fruit for the growing domestic market. Growers allege they haven't benefited from higher demand because other countries are making a determined run for market share.

Bullard said cattlemen have similar concerns and are watching how the Biden administration handles the blueberry case. Bullard called the level of agricultural imports a "core issue to America."

"The cattlemen are experiencing the same injury from import surges as blueberry farmers," he said. "At some point we have to address this, or we will be in as serious shape as the blueberry growers."

The U.S. Trade Act of 1974 allows the White House to impose trade barriers to protect an imperiled industry.

The governments of Canada, Mexico, Peru and Chile have pushed back, saying their farmers are not harming U.S. growers.

The trade commission held a hearing Jan. 12. Following up, the Blueberry Coalition for Progress and Health, made up of multinational companies, argued U.S. growers failed to show they were suffering.

"This is hardly an industry on the brink of economic extinction. It is thriving and not deserving of safeguard relief," the coalition claimed in post-hearing comments.

U.S. blueberry growers counter that the last five years have been hard, and it's only going to get worse as other countries ramp up production.

Transport: 'You couldn't pay me to export animals'

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Courtesy of Darrell Stevenson

Crates of cattle await shipment.

were worth $311 million in 2020.

When pigs fly

Putting hogs on an airplane is a "logistical headache," said Doug Newcom, vice president of genetics and technology at the National Swine Registry.

"You couldn't pay me to export animals," said Newcom.

He laughed.

Imagine a Boeing 747 aircraft parked by a cargo terminal at dawn. A crew loads 1,000 pigs. Inside the plane, the pigs move inside large wooden crates two or three stories tall and balanced for weight.

Because pigs breathe heavily, it's hot and humid inside. Animal handlers on board say they can't get the smell of manure out of their clothes afterward.

Getting pigs to the airport is complex and expensive: blood tests, often $300 per pig, extensive paperwork, quarantine periods of 30 to 60 days.

Exporters estimate it can cost up to $18,000 just to charter an airplane, and Newcom estimated another $600 fee per pig — not counting what the customer pays the breeder for the animal.

The biggest buyers last year were Canada, Central and South America and parts of Asia.

Last year, after losing many of its hogs to African swine fever, China imported more than 25,000 live hogs, mostly from Europe, but bought none from the U.S.

"My gut feeling is that was strictly political in nature," said Newcom.

Under a Biden presidency, that may change. This month, breed associations told the Capital Press they're preparing the first major shipments of pigs to China in a long time.

Dairy

Martin Sieber, CEO and president of U.S. Livestock Genetics Export Inc., said demand for American dairy cows is "huge and increasing."

USDA estimates the U.S. exported 50,261 dairy cows, mainly Holsteins and Jerseys, last year.

Tony Clayton, exporter and president of Clayton Agri-Marketing Inc., said there's swelling interest in U.S. dairy genetics in the Middle East. Days before talking with the Capital Press, Clayton put together a ship load of thousands of cattle to Pakistan.

Vietnam, too, is an emerging market.

Large volumes of dairy cows are typically moved via ship on journeys that can take weeks.

The market for dairy semen has also catapulted. Between 1980 and 2019, according to the National Association of Animal Breeders Inc., dairy semen export sales increased 1,015%.

Tony Clayton

Although artificial insemination is expanding, experts say live shipments will continue because many buyers aren't willing to wait years for animals to mature, and many countries still lack the infrastructure and knowledge to handle AI.

Where's the beef?

During fiscal year 2020, according to trade data, breeding cattle exports were worth $69 million.

Demand for beef is growing in the Middle East. Buyers often want live animals rather than semen because that shortens rearing time, lessens water needs and meets demand for freshly slaughtered "halal" meat butchered and prepared as prescribed by Islamic law.

International buyers are most likely to purchase from states with few disease issues, like those without Bluetongue, a viral disease in ruminants.

One top breeder, Angus rancher Darrell Stevenson in Montana, said his family has been exporting cattle for generations. Stevenson recalls having many foreign guests visit his farm when he was little. He even met his wife through the industry; she was an exporter's daughter.

Stevenson has shipped thousands of animals to Russia, Uzbekistan and elsewhere over the past decade. Once, he said, he had 95 semi trucks lined up with cattle waiting to board a ship.

Stevenson said some of his customers have been governments importing cattle to secure food supplies for growing populations and to stimulate rural economies.

"Exporting animals isn't a get-rich-quick scheme, but it's a good way to add a little extra profit if it's done right," he said.

Sheep

Because of disease protocols, American sheep producers who want to import genetics are generally limited to semen instead of live animals, according to Susan Schoenian, a sheep and goat specialist at the University of Maryland.

Laparoscopic artificial insemination, or LAI, has played a significant role in lifting America's dairy sheep industry, especially with Assaf and Lacaune breeds.

Terry Felda, a rancher in Oregon's eastern desert region, imported Assaf and cross-bred them into her line. Assaf are genetically acclimated to low-water, high desert environments like hers.

"These sheep will produce more milk with the same feed dollar," she said.

Goats

The Western U.S. has strong dairy goat genetic lines.

Clayton, the exporter, said he's seeing "quite a bit of interest" in live Alpines, Nubians, Toggenburgs and Saanens across the Middle East and Africa.

"But we're battling for cargo space. With Amazon online orders and now the COVID vaccine, we're in competition for space on airlines," said Clayton.

Meat goats, including American Kikos originally from New Zealand, are also in demand.

Rare breeds

Although commercial livestock constitute the largest volume, experts say shipments of rare and endangered breeds also matter.

Jeannette Beranger, senior program manager for the Livestock Conservancy, said that while commercial agriculture is critical to feed large populations, heritage breeds have unique qualities.

Beranger raises Crevecoeur chickens, a heritage breed with moist, flavorful meat.

Boer goats, Beranger said, perform better when crossed with rare Spanish goats because they are more parasite resistant.

Ancient White Park cattle eliminate invasive wild parsnip and can live in regions with bears and mountain lions.

"They surround their babies, and God help the predator that tries to touch them," she said.

Heritage breeds also are an "insurance policy" for commercial agriculture. Beranger said the agriculture system is like a stock portfolio. If ranchers invest all their money in a limited number of commercial breeds, they risk losing their investments during a disease outbreak. Rare breed conservation is important, she said, to preserve genetic diversity.

The transport industry is especially important for rare livestock because many of the breeds are not ready hosts for AI and thus need to be shipped live.

Humane concerns

While the live animal transport industry continues growing, so does the number of its critics.

Animal rights groups such as PETA and Compassion in World Farming call for an all-out ban on live animal transports, saying livestock can be treated poorly and even die.

They have a point. Cargo vessels carrying livestock are twice as likely to be lost by sinking or grounding compared to ships carrying just about anything else, based on a decade's worth of maritime data. During the past decade, 60 people and thousands of animals have drowned.

Maritime experts say this is because the global live animal fleet is the oldest shipping fleet in the world and suffers corrosion from animal waste.

Veterinarians say America has fewer ship integrity issues than most nations because the U.S. Coast Guard is "vigilant" in examining ships.

Even so, about 300 veterinarians around the world have formed an association called Vets Against Live Animal Export, or VALE. Many of them formerly worked aboard ships transporting livestock.

Susan Foster, an Australian veterinarian who worked for years in a mixed animal and dairy practice, is VALE's spokeswoman.

She said animals are much safer traveling by airplane than by ship. Planes have incidents too, including mass deaths from ventilation problems, but that's rare.

"If I had to be an animal, I would want to be transported by plane," said Foster.

Transport standards

The U.S. has some of the highest standards on earth for disease prevention in the import-export process. Mike Stepien, spokesman for USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, or APHIS, said his agency ensures free trade while protecting against pests and diseases.

Stepien said APHIS has 245 employees who oversee live animal transports at the port of origin and the destination. But activists say it's what happens en route that can be problematic.

Foster, the veterinarian, said U.S. transport guidelines are weak.

The Capital Press obtained a copy of the U.S. guidelines from APHIS and reviewed them with Foster. Compared with Australia's standards, U.S. animal care guidelines are substantially lower.

The veterinarian noted several concerns, or "gaps."

U.S. shipping guidelines have no pregnancy exclusions, insufficient requirements about how much feed ships must carry and scant bedding requirements, Foster said. A cow traveling 27 days to Pakistan deserves better than "a sprinkling" of sawdust, she said.

Foster said she's also concerned that U.S. guidelines don't require sheep to be shorn, though that poses a risk when passing through the heat of the tropics. Ships are not required to carry medications, and details about pen spacing are vague.

Stepien of APHIS said ocean voyages must have a caretaker aboard but are not required to have a veterinarian. Foster calls this a problem.

Even when a vet is aboard, Foster said, they should be independent of the exporter and have a good person-to-animal ratio.

"Nowadays, there could be one vet with 50,000 animals on the ocean," she said.

Bad exporters

Some exporters hire vets and make animals comfortable even when it's not required.

But not all exporters are created equal.

"There are some bad apples within our industry that complicates it for the rest of us," said Clayton.

Breed associations said Clayton Agri-Marketing Inc. is a reputable exporter.

Foster, the vet, said she believes farmers would be mortified to see how some exporters treat their animals.

"Most producers do genuinely care about the animals in their paddock. A bad exporter doesn't give a rat," said Foster. "For some of them, it's just a dollar sign on four legs they can move to the other side of the world."

Stevenson, the Angus rancher, advises farmers to do their research.

"This is not something you just dip your toe into or try to figure out on your own. There are plenty of bad or fake investors, orders and exporters. It's a huge risk and I've just been very fortunate. I know other farmers who've got their heads cut off," he said.

The Livestock Exporters Association, Stevenson said, is a good place to start.

Fixing the system

Although Foster, the vet, said she would like a ban on live animal transport, she knows that's unlikely and therefore posed some potential solutions.

First, USDA should reform its guidelines.

Second, she said, automation like blockchain technology should be used to track animal health.

Into the future

Despite controversies and challenges, transport of live animals continues, and market researchers forecast the global livestock genetics market will expand to $58 billion by 2023.

The future of the industry is uncertain with new political leaders and calls for humane reforms. But this much seems sure: Cows will keep sailing. Pigs will keep flying. And chickens will keep crossing the world.

Water: 'We still have other legal issues, including water rights of tribes'

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Lake and coho salmon in the lower Klamath River.

Last year, the agencies issued a three-year interim operating plan for the Klamath Project while they revise a previously scrapped Biological Opinion, or BiOp. The interim plan requires the bureau to send an additional 23,000 acre-feet of stored project water downriver to protect salmon from low flows, warm water and disease during drought years.

That, however, could change under the Interior Department's new guidance.

After meeting with water users, Bernhardt directed the Interior Solicitor to conduct a reassessment of project operations, evaluating irrigation contracts that were signed well before the ESA was passed.

In a letter to Simmons, Bernhardt said project operations "have come to suffer from a tortured consultation history."

"Through these processes, Klamath Project operations for water supply, endangered species, and tribal trusts have become substantially conflated," Bernhardt wrote. "The outcome is an operating plan that no longer allows for inspection of any individual piece for compliance, creates confusion, and begets litigation and discord to no one party's service."

What the reassessment ultimately found was, based on federal court rulings, the bureau does not have discretion to reallocate water contracted for irrigation to protect species.

"Water stored previously and in priority on behalf of the Klamath Project is not available for reallocation for the purposes of meeting these in-stream flow rights, even if they are senior to the entity that previously stored those supplies," the document states.

Tricia Hill, president of the Klamath Water Users Association and a fourth-generation farmer at Walker Farms and Gold Dust Potato Processors in Malin, Ore., said the findings are positive news for local farmers, ranchers and rural communities.

"The federal government has recognized that we have been over-regulated under the ESA, and that needs to change," she said.

Both Hill and Simmons said the reassessment is not a "magic bullet" that guarantees irrigation water forever. The bureau's allocation is still subject to state and federal water law, including senior rights of tribes in the Klamath Basin.

"We still have other legal issues, including water rights of tribes that will one day be quantified, that can affect us," Hill said.

Nor does the guidance exempt the Klamath Project from the ESA entirely. "Reclamation has found that it still has duties for species protection, but those duties do not include imposing harmful shortages on irrigation as we have seen in the past," Simmons said.

Simmons said he anticipates there could be political blowback with the transition to President Joe Biden and his new administration. Biden has nominated Rep. Deb Haaland, D-N.M., as Interior secretary. If confirmed, she would be the first Native American cabinet secretary and head of the Interior Department.

"We look forward to working with the Biden administration, which we hope will recognize that the new guidance is based on current law rather than political preference," Simmons said.

A spokeswoman for the Bureau of Reclamation office in Sacramento, Calif., said the agency was not prepared to comment.