

Trump’s tariffs could sow trouble for GOP in farm districts

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SPANGLE, Wash. — In the aptly named Harvester Restaurant, wheat farmer Roy Dube makes clear he’s not a fan of President Donald Trump’s trade policy.

“We get him elected into office and he pulls us out of trade agreements,” Dube said last week as local farmers gathered to hear Democratic House candidate Lisa Brown.

Dube says China is buying less wheat from eastern Washington farmers and Trump’s policies have opened the door for Australia and Canada to wrestle away business. His frustration extends to his congressional representative, Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, who is the highest-ranking Republican woman in the House and running for an eighth term.

“I’m concerned that Cathy McMorris Rodgers didn’t put up more resistance,” Dube said.

The U.S. tariffs on agriculture products, sown by Trump, have grown into an election-year threat to Republicans in rural districts that are heavily reliant on exports for their economy. With the livelihoods of farm-



Some Democratic candidates, like Lisa Brown (right), are determined not to let Republican members of Congress, such as Rep. Cathy McMorris Rodgers, R-Wash. (left), distance themselves from the president’s trade policies.



AP Photo/Ted S. Warren, File

ers at risk, opposition to the tariffs could make a difference in some races and help determine which party takes control of Congress.

McMorris Rodgers has made it clear she opposes the president’s actions on tariffs, but so far, the Republican-controlled House has not taken up legislation to block them. Democrats characterize GOP lawmakers as unable or unwilling to check Trump, who has declared that “tariffs are the greatest.”

“My opponent, though she would say she’s concerned and talking to the administration about these issues, she’s still mostly a cheerleader for the president,” said Brown, a former state legislator.

Facing what appears to be the tightest re-election race of her career, McMorris Rodgers is emphasizing that she has encouraged the president to “move from tariffs to agreement.”

“I have made it very clear that I don’t support the across-the-board tariffs, that we should take a more targeted approach,” McMorris Rodgers told The Associated Press.

Clues that the president’s trade policies will play a role in the November midterm elections can be seen in Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue’s travel schedule. Over the past few months, he’s been to Eastern Washington to join McMorris Rodgers in

meeting with farmers. He’s also been to California’s Central Valley to meet with farmers in the districts of Republican Reps. Jeff Denham and David Valadao. He also went to Iowa, where Republican Reps. David Young and Rod Blum are both in close races.

The battle for the Senate could also be affected by the tariff issue, particularly in North Dakota, Indiana and Missouri, where Republicans hope to knock off three Democratic incumbents.

The president has tried to allay farmers’ concerns with an aid package of up to \$12 billion to help them weather the trade war.

J. Read Smith, a rancher near St. John, Washington, said he shares Trump’s goal of seeking a level playing field in trade.

“But antagonizing our trading partners is not the way to do it,” said Smith, who emphasized that he is not a Democrat. “I’m an American.”

Aaron Flansburg, who runs a diversified farm near Pullman, Washington, said he’s skeptical the tariffs will change the way most farmers vote, though.

“Farmers often vote for Republicans,” Flansburg said. “Whether that will change, I have my doubts.”

McMorris Rodgers said it’s her sense that voters are willing to give the president time to negotiate better

agreements.

“Yes, there’s a lot of uncertainty. There’s a sense that we need to get these trade agreements into place as soon as possible, but there’s also a recognition that for too long America has not taken action, especially against China,” she said.

The United States is scheduled to slap tariffs on \$200 billion in Chinese imports Monday, adding to the more than \$50 billion worth that already face U.S. import taxes.

China retaliated with its own tariffs on U.S. products. The world’s two biggest economies are clashing over allegations that China steals technology from American companies.

The Trump administration also imposed a 25 percent tariff on imported steel and a 10 percent tariff on imported aluminum that included imports from the European Union, Canada and Mexico — and just about everyone else — in the name of national security.

Those tariffs also drew retaliation. For example, the EU targeted bourbon, a key industry in Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell’s home state of Kentucky, where Republican Rep. Andy Barr and Democratic challenger Amy McGrath are battling in a close election.

Overall, about 6 in 10 Americans disapprove of

how the president is handling trade negotiations with other countries.

Farm groups have testified in congressional hearings that retaliatory tariffs increase the cost of their products for customers abroad, giving foreign competitors an edge.

“The current tariffs, continuing back-and-forth retaliatory actions and trade uncertainties are hitting American agriculture from all sides and are causing us to lose our markets. Once you lose a market, it is really tough to get it back,” said Kevin Paap, president of the Minnesota Farm Bureau.

Rep. Ben Ray Lujan, who is overseeing Democratic efforts in House races, pointed to Iowa as a state where he believes the administration’s tariffs could backfire. He said primary turnout was up, in part because small family farmers and the businesses they buy from are worried. “I really believe that in those districts, you’ll see people come forward and hold everyone accountable not standing up for them,” Lujan said.

GOP lawmakers from Iowa, including Young and Blum, signed onto a letter calling on the president to act quickly to save rural economies. Blum also wrote Trump separately urging him to “consider the consequences tariffs have on American manufacturers.”

When the president visited Blum’s district a few days later, he thanked him for his “political courage” on trade.

“You’ve taken some heat for it in the short term, but in the long run, the farmers, the manufacturers, the employers are all going to be better off,” Blum told the president.

His Democratic challenger, Abby Finkenauer, has seized on that thank you.

“There is no way he should stand there and thank the administration for throwing the livelihoods of Iowans in flux,” Finkenauer said.

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