

Local ranchers concerned about losing local control

By PHIL WRIGHT
The Observer

LA GRANDE — Eastern Oregon agriculture producers and associates have concerns the Biden administration could take back local control, but they also see some hope the new administration could get tough on the big corporations that control U.S. meat production.

Curtis Martin is the patriarch of the VP Ranch in North Powder, a former president of the Oregon Cattlemen's Association and serves as a director for the United State's Cattlemen's Association. The Trump administration, he said, favored control and rulemaking at the local level.

"By that I mean not having edicts come out of DC," he said.

But under Biden, he said, the federal government again seems to be moving toward more authoritarian control, more like the approach of the Obama administration. Martin said farmers and ranchers are not keen on that.

"We feel like the less amount of government we can have in our business the better off we are," he said.

Colby Marshall agrees. He is the former vice president of the Silvies Valley Ranch in Harney County but now works in real estate there and keeps a tab on the local ag scene. The Trump administration recognized one size does not fit all in agriculture, he said, and for the most part the Trump administration emphasized local control. A swing back toward a more authoritarian approach would not be helpful, he said, pointing out that's already how the state government of Oregon operates when it comes to ag.

He said the Trump administration favored local control to deal with farming and ranching issues rather than a more authoritarian stance.

"For the most part that is how the Trump administration went about it," he said. "One size does not fit all in agriculture."

Under the Biden administration, however, he said he anticipates a swing back to centralized federal control. The state government of Oregon already takes that approach, he said, and having the weight of the federal government on top of that will not help agriculture producers.

Marshall also said he is concerned about what could come of the proposal from Republican U.S. Rep. Mike Simpson of Idaho to



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

North Powder ranger Riley Martin bundles up rope cut from hay bales on Monday, April 5, 2021. Martin and his father, Curtis Martin, say they want the Biden administration to take on the four big companies that control at least 80% of the meat products in the U.S.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Riley Martin exits his tractor to feed a herd of cattle on his North Powder ranch Monday, April 5, 2021. Martin, along with his father Curtis Martin, are among other ranchers who remain skeptical toward the Biden administration.

remove the four dams on the Lower Snake River. The change in administration opened the door for this plan, he said, which he called "a terrible idea" that would devastate producers who rely on water from those dams for irrigation and have a drastic effect on shipping grain out of the Pacific Northwest.

Ag producers also don't want to see the

Biden Administration bring back a deal such as the North American Free Trade Agreement. Chris Heffernan also farms near North Powder with his two sons, Justin and Sheldon. Chris Heffernan said President Donald Trump replacing NAFTA with the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, which took effect July 1, 2020, was about one thing:

leveling the playing field so U.S. ag producers have a fair shot at competition.

Martin said the trade disputes that arose under the Trump administration, particularly with China, were tough on the American farmer and rancher, but he said they understood why the president took on the challenge. China, he said, had maintained an unfair advantage in the trade of ag products with the U.S. for a long time. That trade war hurt in the short term, he said, but the long-term outcome is worth it.

Martin and his son Riley Martin said they want to see some real movement against what they described as the meat packaging cartel or monopoly.

Ag producers at one end of the tunnel are making quality protein and goods for the consumers at the opposite end, the Martins said, but in between those two points are Tyson Foods, JBS, Cargill and Smithfield Foods, and they control at least 80% of all the beef in the United States.

"It's a horrible monopoly right now that's a stranglehold on the producers," Riley Martin said.

Curtis Martin said the Trump Administration seemed to be hesitant to use antitrust laws to break up that stranglehold while the Biden administration may have more of a tendency to pursue antitrust cases. Still, he's skeptical.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Curtis Martin said.

The father and son also want to see a return to labels letting U.S. consumers know where their beef is coming from. A USDA stamp of approval, they said, only lets the buyer know the product meets certain standards but says nothing about where the beef is from or whether it was repackaged before it hit the store shelves.

"It's really disheartening," Riley Martin said. "The people don't know where their food is coming from."

"We need to focus on source identity, and we need to be truthful to the American consumer," Curtis Martin said. "Let's make sure we're not lying to them."

Riley Martin also said the Trump administration showed it valued the American farmer and rancher.

"It was nice to hear us on the main stage and to hear us being mentioned," he said.

Just how much the Biden administration will value the nation's ag producers still is up in the air.