

Free trade issue dropped as race finishes in Montana

By Matt Gouras
The Associated Press
June 1, 2008

HELENA - Hillary Rodham Clinton and Barack Obama have been largely silent on the issue of free trade agreements as the primary season is set to end Tuesday in Montana and South Dakota, where agriculture and exports reign supreme.

The change is noticeable from just a few months ago, when Clinton was critical of the North American Free Trade Agreement as she looked to rally support among working-class voters in Pennsylvania. There, some people blame free trade agreements for U.S. job losses. Obama, too, has been critical of NAFTA when campaigning for the same blue-collar votes.

But the politics of trade agreements changed drastically when the campaigns shifted from the Midwest rust belt to the ranching and farming states of Montana and neighboring South Dakota.

"I think they are not talking about it because the trade deals have been good for Montana and South Dakota in terms of agriculture products," said Montana political analyst Craig Wilson. "Why talk about it if it is just going to get you in trouble?"

Both states rely on agriculture exports overseas and host the last primaries in the nation on June 3. Wilson said exports now comprise about 10 percent of Montana's economy.

"These trade agreements are pretty instrumental to our bottom line," said Errol Rice, executive vice president of the Montana Stockgrowers Association. "It's absolutely huge to our bottom line, frankly."

The issue of trade is not always clear in Montana.

While U.S. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., is a big fan of free trade largely because agriculture needs overseas markets, he has opposed some trade deals. Baucus has even drawn criticism from a few in his own party for pushing the issue too hard and not paying enough attention to key labor and environmental problems.

Baucus has dismissed those who want to spike agreements based on protectionism alone and says the deals can create jobs in Montana.

The state's lone congressman, Republican Rep. Denny Rehberg, has a ranching background and has supported some free trade deals while opposing others. The agriculture community often endorses the deals, but sometimes opposes them amid worries they aren't fair.

And the state's logging industry is not happy about past deals they believe let Canadians flood the market with cheap timber.

Erik Iverson, chairman of the Montana Republican Party, said he understands it's a tricky issue for the Democratic candidates. You can't score points by just criticizing all trade deals, he said.

"In general, most Montana ag producers are in favor of trade," Iverson said. "We produce more in Montana than we can consume. We have to sell our products abroad. Our producers are savvy to that."

Former U.S. Sen. Tom Daschle of South Dakota, another big agriculture state, said he doesn't think the issue is clear in the Democratic primaries.

"I think the issue cuts both ways and I think it's too early to know how it's all going to play out. It's certainly an issue of great import to voters," Daschle said. "The trade issue, in the primaries, there will be a different context to it than in the general. In the primaries it's probably broken about even."

With little to gain on the trade issue in the farm states, the candidates have not pushed it.

Clinton spokeswoman Kate Downen said the New York senator has repeatedly talked about the need to strengthen trade agreements to benefit workers and the economy.

"She believes in smart, pro-American trade and has laid out a detailed agenda that she will implement as president, including renegotiating NAFTA, taking a time-out from new trade deals and cracking down on countries like China that do not abide by international trade rules," Downen said.

Obama has said, as part of his plan for rural Montana, that he would ensure trade agreements have labor, environmental, and other standards that are fair to American farmers.

His spokesman Dan Leistikow said Sunday that Obama believes NAFTA has cost Montana jobs.

"Sen. Obama has always opposed NAFTA and has pledged to fix the agreement so that it makes sense for American workers," Leistikow said. "He looks forward to a robust debate this fall against John McCain, who supports NAFTA and voted to continue giving tax breaks for companies that move jobs overseas."

Wilson, the political analyst, said the issue won't hurt Obama or Clinton much in the primary because there is not much perceivable difference between the two.

“In a general election against a Republican, absolutely it could matter,” Wilson said.
“Now, I don’t think it matters so much in the primary.”