

# Sugar Groups Praise Letter By Obama Backing Program

By Jerry Hagstrom  
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Sugar grower leaders today praised Democratic presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama after receiving a letter he sent supporting the sugar price-support program and the 2008 farm bill. When Obama was a state senator in Illinois, he had criticized the sugar program for raising ingredient prices for Chicago candy makers. But Tuesday, Obama wrote that he "will commit to listening and working with you in the future to ensure that we have a safety net that works for all of agriculture," even though he still has "concerns about the program." He added, "We should reward your hard work with policies that will keep your industry and your communities strong."

Bill Hejl, former president of the World Association of Beet and Cane Growers and the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers Association, said Obama's statement indicated the candidate now "represents a broader range of interest" than when he was a state legislator. Hejl added that Obama has never voted against the sugar program and supported the 2008 farm bill. By contrast, McCain has consistently opposed the program and agreed with President Bush's decision to veto the farm bill. Hejl described Obama's positions on farm policy as "ten times better" than McCain's. Alan Welp, president of the American Sugarbeet Growers Association, said farmers usually vote Republican but that he believes McCain's opposition to farm programs will prompt them to switch. "Sen. McCain seems to want to radically alter [the farm safety net]. It is not what we need at this time with higher input costs and lower commodity prices."

Carolyn Cheney, president of the American Sugar Alliance, said through a spokesman that her group is "very encouraged" by the letter. "It is obvious that he understands the challenges facing America's farmers," she added. A spokesman for Florida Crystals Corp., the cane sugar company owned by the Fanjul family, said that despite the letter and McCain's position, family members are split. He said Alfie Fanjul is supporting Obama, while Pepe Fanjul Sr. and Pepe Fanjul Jr. are supporting McCain. "It makes for a healthy discussion," the spokesman said. In the letter, Obama also noted he has voted for ethanol and renewable fuels mandates that McCain has opposed and would insist on "enforceable labor and environmental standards" in trade agreements. Obama added he would support "full funding" for the overseas market promotion programs that McCain has said he would cut to balance the budget.

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