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## **State sugar beet growers sour on proposed trade pact**

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Colorado sugar beet growers see nothing sweet in a foreign-trade agreement that they say could decimate their industry. The proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement, known by its acronym CAFTA, would give foreign producers duty-free access to U.S. markets and also lift tariffs on U.S. exports to Central American countries.

While the trade agreement is viewed as favorable to most U.S. agriculture sectors such as cattle, wheat and corn, it could wipe out much of the \$21 billion U.S. sugar industry because of cheap sugar imports, critics say.

"We feel that this agreement is very threatening," said Alan Welp, a Yuma County sugar beet grower. "It'll really, really depress prices. We don't feel like we need any more foreign sugar in this country."

The crop has generated average annual income to Colorado beet farmers of \$37 million over the past 15 years. Until drought dropped Colorado's rank to ninth place last year, the state was the nation's seventh-largest producer of sugar beets.

CAFTA, awaiting a ratification vote in Congress, is becoming a hot political issue, in Colorado and nationally.

In Colorado, 4th Congressional District challenger Stan Matsunaka said he opposes CAFTA because of the harm it would do to beet growers and sugar processors.

"It's pretty clear it would put all these folks out of business," said Matsunaka, a Democrat whose uncles were Colorado sugar beet farmers.

Incumbent 4th District Congresswoman Marilyn Musgrave, a Republican, probably will vote for CAFTA although she is "concerned" about the impact to beet growers, said Musgrave's chief of staff, Guy Short.

"Right now, (Musgrave) is balancing her concerns with the sugar agreement against the benefits to the beef, wheat and corn industries," Short said.

The American Farm Bureau Federation estimates that CAFTA will increase the value of U.S. farm exports to Central America by \$900 million a year within 15 years.

"We're supporting CAFTA because of all the money it will bring in," said Tracee Bentley of the Colorado Farm Bureau. "But there's no doubt that the one and only commodity that takes a hit on this is sugar."

The trade pact was created this year by officials from the United States, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.

Colorado sugar beet growers said they have collected 4,000 petition signatures opposing the CAFTA sugar provision. The beet farmers will hold a news conference Wednesday in Fort Morgan to discuss their concerns.

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