

TRADE: Loud and clear

Beet industry takes on CAFTA

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Grand Forks Herald
September 17, 2004

MOORHEAD - With presidential politics heating up in Minnesota, a new pro-beet sugar group called the Midwest Fair Trade Coalition is turning up the heat on the debate against the Central American Free Trade Agreement.

The coalition of beet cooperatives staged a news conference on the Bob and Mark Nyquist farm, south of Moorhead, to launch a public relations campaign on a petition drive that has collected 25,000 signatures against CAFTA. Speaking against CAFTA were U.S. Sens. Kent Conrad and Byron Dorgan, Democrats from North Dakota, and Reps. Earl Pomeroy, D-N.D., and Collin Peterson, D-Minn., as well as Roger Johnson, North Dakota's agriculture commissioner.

The speakers were flanked by 22 sheets of plywood covered with petitions collected since February. The group plans to stage similar events in St. Paul and in other congressional districts in Minnesota, says Nick Sinner, executive director of the Red River Valley Sugarbeet Growers, one of the partners in the coalition.

Conrad praised the group for standing up against CAFTA to protect its \$2.6 billion industry.

"They understand that our economic lives are at stake," said Conrad, a key defender of sugar on the Senate Agriculture committee. "CAFTA is just one agreement, but it's the beginning."

Open gate

CAFTA allows only 100,000 tons of additional sugar into the U.S. but would likely become a precedent for other agreements in the pipeline that could bring over 500,000 tons in. That would kill the U.S. sugar program, critics say.

"This is about whether we have a sugar in our future. This is about whether we have 30,000 jobs in the valley. This is about whether we have a strong and vibrant economy in the Red River Valley of North Dakota and Minnesota," Conrad said.

Peterson said the Bush administration doesn't have the votes in the House to pass CAFTA, so he doubts it will be brought up in a lame duck session, but says "a lot of mischief can be done" when some members are out of town for elections.

Pomeroy predicted CAFTA won't come to a vote before Election Day, but that the game could then shift to after the election when "they can buy off a few votes and make some other deals."

There has been speculation in the industry that the administration might renegotiate sugar-related provisions in the wake of the Dominican Republic's recent efforts to institute limits on high-fructose corn sweetener content in that country's soft drink industry.

Presidential politics

Conrad underlined the fact that Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry has told him "he would not allow the CAFTA agreement to go forward if he were elected" while the Bush administration has "come forward with the agreement and continues to support it."

But Peterson said Kerry opposes CAFTA "for the wrong reasons" and is withholding his campaign support until Kerry puts his support for sugar in writing. Sugar is the "No. 1 issue" Peterson hears about in his 7th District.

"It still sticks in my craw," Peterson said, that the Clinton administration overcame sugar industry opposition to the North American Free Trade Agreement by promising a "side letter" that would protect the industry from Mexican sugar. The side letter was lost, and the sugar industry was not protected, said Peterson.

"Now, we've got a mess with Mexico that we still can't get fixed," Peterson said. "What I'm really nervous about today is you have all of these Clinton people running Kerry's campaign. I had a discussion with the so-called trade person two days ago, and I didn't like the answers I got. I want this in writing.

"(Kerry's) already said he's not going to support this (CAFTA) draft, and he's going to renegotiate it, but he wants to renegotiate it 'labor and environment'. That's fine, but what I want him to say is 'and sugar.' Sugar will not be part of it, and sugar will only be negotiated in the WTO.

"I want a commitment, because I don't trust any of them," Peterson said. "I clearly don't trust Bush."

Pomeroy said the only significant thing to him is that Kerry opposes CAFTA, not why.

Peterson says he's been asked weekly to campaign for Kerry in the 7th District. If Kerry provides the sugar promise on CAFTA, Peterson would campaign for him.

"He's not popular in my district," Peterson said, flatly. "He's against snowmobiles, against ethanol. He voted twice to get rid of the sugar program."

The district is Republican-leaning, Peterson said, and right-leaning on such things as guns, abortion and gay rights. "I've got to have something. Something I can campaign on," Peterson said.

Dorgan said nothing about Kerry's position on the issue, but said CAFTA is about "exporting America's jobs and destroying farms." He called CAFTA "just the latest chapter in a book of trade failures."

Other support

Victor Krabbenhoft, chairman of Minn-Dak Farmers Cooperative, one of the members of the coalition, said North Dakota Gov. John Hoeven, a Republican, couldn't make the news conference because of a scheduling conflict. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., was unable to make it because he was observing a Jewish holiday. A staffer for Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., attended.

Krabbenhoft said the three have been good supporters of the sugar industry.

One of the light moments at the news conference came when Peterson remembered how in Mexico a group of anti-NAFTA farmers nearly burned a tractor at a downtown hotel in his "honor."

"I don't know if we're going to go that far here - are we?" Peterson said.

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