Rocky Mountain News

Speakout: Trade deal endangers Colorado farmers

By Alan Welp, Special to the News
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On Oct. 29, the *Rocky Mountain News* ran an editorial headlined "The trade war in Colorado's 4th/Sugar-beet growers oppose critical pact." Yes, as a sugar beet grower in Colorado's 4th Congressional District I do oppose the Central America Free Trade Agreement because, if approved by Congress, CAFTA will likely kill an important Colorado industry.

CAFTA was negotiated by the Bush administration and quietly signed on the Friday before the Memorial Day weekend when few were paying attention. The agreement covers several areas of trade including technology, wheat, beef and sugar.

CAFTA threatens a rare breed - Colorado's true family farmers. While the *News* characterizes the industry as "Big Sugar," compared to other crops and livestock, sugar is a relatively small player. Maybe that's why it is so easy for the administration to sell out beet growers. We are, in fact, 433 Colorado growers who farm an average of 83 acres of sugar beets.

We have Colorado-grown sugar on our grocery store shelves today because these family farmers took a personal risk. The state's sugar beet growers invested their own money in forming the Western Sugar Cooperative two years ago. Without that investment, it's likely our industry in Colorado would have died back then. But individual growers pulled together because it was the only way we could be competitive in a very volatile market threatened by unfair foreign competition. CAFTA could undo everything the grower-owners of Western Sugar did to keep a viable industry moving forward.

Our industry is in favor of free trade, so long as it's fair trade. In fact, we currently import from 41 countries, making the U.S. the fourth largest net importer in the world. For some time we have advocated handling sugar trade in the World Trade Organization because only there can we compete on a level playing field against the world's other sugar producers.

The *News* would also have its readers believe that CAFTA is a "boon to the state's cattle, wheat and corn growers." It's important to look at facts when examining CAFTA's so-called benefits. You need not go any further than the International Trade Commission's study on CAFTA. The ITC is an independent, nonpartisan organization that evaluates every trade agreement before it goes to Congress.

Here are the facts:

• U.S. grains already supply 94 percent of the Central American market, which coincidently is smaller than the economy of Denver. In other words, there's no new or expanded market to gain.

• Colorado wheat farmers already face zero tariffs in the region today, save a negligible 1 percent tariff in Costa Rica.

• CAFTA grants immediate beef access for "prime and choice cuts." However, nearly half of the people in the region earn less than $2 a day; who will be able to buy this choice beef besides hotels and the elite?

In short, if CAFTA is approved, Colorado's $70 million sugar beet industry would be traded away to gain minimal access to a tiny market. Let's face it: the math just doesn't add up. Hopefully, *News* readers and Congress see CAFTA for what it is - a deal that wipes out sugar farms and has little upside for anyone else.

Alan Welp is a sugar beet grower and current board member of the Colorado Sugarbeet Growers Association.