

Sugar Growers Sour on Trade Pact, Bush

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NORCROSS, MINN. -- Driving his pickup next to a huge field of sugar beets on a hot August afternoon, Terry Vipond offered two observations: His crop definitely needs rain, and the nation probably needs a new president.

Four years ago, Vipond, a 53-year-old farmer from Grant County, voted for George W. Bush, figuring Al Gore was too radical an environmentalist. This year, he said, he's likely to vote for Democratic Sen. John Kerry, figuring Bush is too radical a free trader.

From Minnesota's Red River Valley to the bayous of Louisiana, many sugar producers are souring on the president, fearing his proposed trade plan with Central America could flood the United States with imported sugar and put them out of business.

"It's obviously important to me -- it's my livelihood," said Jim Horvath, president of American Crystal Sugar Co. in Moorhead. In 2000, Horvath said, he gave \$2,000 to help get Bush elected, but he hasn't written any checks to the president's campaign this year.

Bush supporters are trying to prevent defections by pointing out that Kerry has cast votes against the sugar industry. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., noted that in 1999 and 2000 Kerry voted to end the federal sugar program, taking positions that were contrary to those of the late Sen. Paul Wellstone, a fellow Democrat.

"John Kerry has a lousy record on sugar. ... This Boston Brahmin is no champion of Midwest agriculture," Coleman said.

But less than two months before Election Day, Democrats say discontentment with Bush is growing and is bound to influence votes in Minnesota, the nation's largest producer of sugar beets and a key battleground in this year's presidential race.

These have been up-and-down times for the sugar industry. In 2000, the federal government paid producers to destroy their crops as a way to reduce a glut of sugar. Many sugar growers now say their very survival is at stake, noting that the industry already is suffering from declining consumption, partly the result of low-carbohydrate diets.

Enter CAFTA

As they prepare for another harvest this month, sugar producers are keeping a close eye on Capitol Hill, seeking to thwart the proposed Central American Free Trade Agreement, known as CAFTA. As championed by Bush, it would reduce trade tariffs between the United States and the Central American countries of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic.

"It may help them, but I don't see how it helps us," said Vipond, who farms with his four brothers and two nephews.

Rep. Collin Peterson, D-Minn., said CAFTA now ranks as the biggest issue in his conservative-leaning Seventh District, where Minnesota sugar beet farmers are concentrated.

With anger growing over the president's policies on trade, the economy and the war in Iraq, Peterson said Bush would lose the district if the election were held today. That would be a huge turnaround since 2000, when Bush lost the state but carried the rural Seventh District by nearly 15 percentage points, his biggest margin of victory in a Minnesota congressional district.

Peterson called CAFTA "a huge deal, and that's why everybody is riled up about it." If the sugar industry collapses in Minnesota, he said, the region would lose thousands of jobs and at least 25 percent of the businesses in the Red River Valley.

"I've had a lot of people come up and tell me they voted for him last time and they're not going to vote for him this time," Peterson said. "And I haven't had one single person come up to me and say, 'I voted for Al Gore and this time I'm voting for George Bush.' "

Kerry opposes CAFTA and wants it renegotiated, but critics say his overall record on sugar is suspect. Coleman cited two other instances in which Kerry opposed Wellstone on key sugar votes: In 1996, Kerry voted to gut a seven-year extension of the sugar program from the 1996 farm law, and he voted to eliminate loans to sugar refiners with revenue of more than \$10 million. In addition, Coleman said, Kerry sponsored a bill in 1995 to eliminate price supports for sugar beets.

While the trade pact is generating plenty of controversy, no vote is likely before the election. Supporters say that at the earliest, a vote could come in November or December, if there's a lame-duck session of Congress.

Coleman, a member of the Senate Agriculture Committee, said the Senate won't vote on the pact until it's changed to protect sugar growers. Like Sen. Mark Dayton, D-Minn., he said he would vote against CAFTA if a vote were held today.

Critics of CAFTA say it would give Central American countries easy access to the U.S. market but wouldn't require them to improve wages, labor laws or conservation standards. "They can't be producing sugar with no environmental laws and labor laws and expect us to compete with that," said Vipond.

Rep. Jim Ramstad, R-Minn., a member of the House Ways and Means Committee and a supporter of CAFTA, said that the pact would help the U.S. economy and that "American farmers can compete with farmers from anyplace, including Central America."

"We need to open up markets, wherever they exist," he said.

Biggest sugar fight

Sugar is big business in many prized states in this year's election, including Florida and California, but the fight over CAFTA has been particularly hot in Louisiana.

Republican Rep. David Vitter, a candidate for an open Senate seat in Louisiana who backs Bush on most issues, is pledging to filibuster CAFTA if he's elected. Many political observers say Louisiana's Democratic Sen. Mary Landrieu won reelection in 2002 because of her staunch support for the state's sugar industry.

"Every candidate is running away from CAFTA because of the sugar vote. ... There's grave concern," said Charlie Melancon, a Democratic congressional candidate in Louisiana's Third District and a descendant of sugar-cane farmers. "We've had shrimpers going out of business because of these trade deals. Now we've got the sugar industry that's threatened."

As an example of how the issue crosses party lines, Horvath -- who's normally a Republican voter -- contributed \$1,000 to Melancon's campaign. Horvath said he's undecided who he'll support for president.

With the election up for grabs in Minnesota, Peterson is hoping that Kerry will travel to the Seventh District to campaign on the issue. He said he'll accept Kerry's invitation to campaign with him if the senator pledges to renegotiate CAFTA and keep sugar out of the pact. "We're going to keep the pressure on him," Peterson said.

Jennifer Porter Gore, a Kerry spokeswoman for Minnesota, said the campaign knows of Peterson's request but that Kerry's stance is clear. "He's against CAFTA in general -- so that means the whole treaty," she said. She said Kerry wants to renegotiate "CAFTA in general and sugar in particular" to make sure Central America would not have an unfair competitive advantage.