

WASHINGTON NEWS

Midwest farmers warn of GOP losses over Trump's policies

By JONATHAN MARTIN
NEW YORK TIMES

CASSELTON, N.D. — Here in the largest soybean-producing county in the country, a snowy winter has left North Dakota farmers like Robert Runck with time on their hands before spring planting — time they have spent stewing over how much they stand to lose if President Trump starts a trade war with China.

“If he doesn’t understand what he’s doing to the nation by doing what he’s doing, he’s going to be a one-term president, plain and simple,” said Runck, a fourth-generation farmer who voted for Trump. Pausing outside the post office in this town of 2,300, Runck said the repercussions could be more immediate for Rep. Kevin Cramer, a Republican whose bid against Sen. Heidi Heitkamp, a Democrat, has been complicated by the proposed tariffs.

“If it doesn’t get resolved by election time, I would imagine it would cost Kevin Cramer some votes,” he said.

Stern warnings are coming from all over the Midwestern states about the political peril for Republicans in Trump’s recent course of action, in which the tariffs he slapped on foreign competitors invited retaliatory tariffs on U.S. agriculture. Soybeans are the United States’ second largest export to China, and that country’s proposed 25 percent duties on the crop would hit hardest in states like Iowa, Kansas and Minnesota — where there are highly competitive House races — as well as Indiana, Missouri and North Dakota, whose Senate contests may determine control of the chamber.

By proposing the tariffs, Trump has moved to fulfill a central promise of his campaign: confronting those countries he believes are undermining American industry. Yet his goal — to revive the steel and aluminum in-

dustries, thereby aiding the Rust Belt states that were crucial to his election — has effectively prioritized one element of the Trump political coalition over another, larger bloc of voters. That larger segment, the farm belt, is essential to Republican success in the midterm elections and beyond.

From the still-thawing soybean fields of North Dakota and Kansas to the corn and pork farms of Iowa, voters across the political spectrum say the president’s attacks on American economic rivals could do grave damage to an already unstable commodities market.

“They’re not in touch with the reality of the Midwest and the impact that the tariffs would have,” said Bart Bergquist, a biology professor and part-time farmer who lives on 10 acres just south of Waterloo, Iowa. Bergquist, who voted for Trump in the 2016 election, added that commodities prices had already taken a toll on the area.

“I know my neighbors are not rolling in money — they’re trying to supplement whatever else they can do to keep going,” he said.

In Kansas, Bob Henry, who grows corn and soybeans in another up-for-grabs House district near the Nebraska border, said the country could ill afford to tangle with a market that American farmers rely on.

“For the United States soybean grower, China is the 800-pound gorilla in the room,” Henry said. He suggested that Beijing is exacting political payback against the Republican heartland: “China knows who got Trump elected.”

After an initial round of tariffs on a modest share of U.S. exports, the Chinese have displayed a more keen awareness of the electoral map and moved to punish those industries whose misfortune will be felt most intensely in states and districts pivotal in 2018.

Karl Rove, the former strategist



New York Times

China’s proposed tariffs on soybeans — a retaliatory move against President Trump’s trade policies — would hit hard in Iowa, Kansas, Missouri — and here in Casselton and other parts of North Dakota.

to President George W. Bush, said a trade clash “would limit Midwestern enthusiasm from our base and limit our ability to hold what we have and pick up more seats.” Rove also grumbled that Trump “has little to no understanding of the farm coalition.”

He may have a slightly better appreciation after a meeting last week in the West Wing with a small group of farm belt Republican senators and governors, during which two of them brought up the adverse effect that tariffs on exports could have in the midterm election, according to officials briefed on the conversation.

Trump used the session to direct a pair of his top economic advisers to reconsider whether the United States should join a free-trade pact with a group of Pacific nations. But just hours later, he signaled on Twitter that he was unlikely to reverse course on that agreement, the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Instead, there are already whis-

pers, in Washington and in agriculture states, that the president is risking a replay of President Jimmy Carter’s grain embargo on the Soviets, which contributed to the massive losses Democrats suffered in 1980.

Indeed, after a year of seeing Trump only muse about pulling out of NAFTA and being stymied by Congress in his attempt to slash the Agriculture Department’s budget, there is now a sense in the farm belt that Trump’s yearning to punish China could inflict real economic and political damage on his own political base. “This is the first time it’s in your face, especially to us in the Midwest,” said Ed Schafer, a Republican former governor of North Dakota who was agriculture secretary under George W. Bush.

North Dakota is not simply another red state where Democrats are bound for extinction. There is an enduring populist streak here, dating back to its mistrust of distant bank-

ers and millers in Minneapolis, Chicago and New York. To this day, the state retains a state-controlled bank and mill.

“We’re Republicans until it comes to subsidies for farmers,” said George Blank, only half-jokingly, as he sipped coffee with a half-dozen fellow retirees at their daily breakfast-and-bull session in Casselton’s Country Kitchen.

And, Blank noted, “everything drives on ag in this state.”

Recalling his years running a construction supply business in a state where 1 in 4 jobs is agriculture-related, he said: “When the price of corn went down that impacted us greatly.”

Now, though, soybeans have become the go-to commodity, said Vanessa Kummer, who farms 4,000 acres with her husband and son near Colfax, N.D.

“It has become our cash crop and the most reliable crop to go to,” she said.

Schneiderman launches probes of Virginia-based veterans charity

By SARAH KLEINER
CENTER FOR PUBLIC INTEGRITY

WASHINGTON — The New York Attorney General’s office has joined Virginia officials in investigating a veterans organization that spends nearly all of the money it raises on telemarketing consultants and its own leader’s salary.

The nonprofit Center for American Homeless Veterans must give New York officials documents “relevant and material to an investigation and inquiry, undertaken in the public interest, of CAHV’s solicitation of charitable contributions,” according to documents obtained by the Center for Public Integrity.

Sarah Rutherford, a spokeswoman for New York Attorney General Eric Schneiderman,

citing an ongoing investigation, declined comment.

The Center for American Homeless Veterans and two sister organizations run by the same man — retired Army Maj. Brian Arthur Hampton — together have raised millions of dollars from donors across the country, but very little of the money goes to veterans themselves, the Center for Public Integrity reported in December.

Virginia Attorney General Mark Herring’s office confirmed in February that it also is investigating the Center for American Homeless Veterans.

Hampton denies any wrongdoing. Federal Election Commission filings released this week show Hampton continues to pump thousands of dollars into his own pocket from the Put Vets First! Political

Action Committee, which he runs out of the same Falls Church, Va., office as the Center for American Homeless Veterans and the Circle of Friends for American Veterans.

Hampton paid himself \$27,240 from his Put Vets First! Political Action Committee from Jan. 1 through March 31, according to the FEC filing.

Hampton rapidly increased Put Vets First! Political Action Committee payments to himself late last year, following a Center for Public Integrity investigation into his political and charitable operations. He paid himself \$20,350 in December 2017 alone — more than three times his compensation in December 2016, according to disclosures filed with the Federal Election Commission.

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