

# Johnson warns against protectionism, trade wars

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Pointing to the billions of people around the world that are all “markets for our products,” U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson this week stressed the benefits of both imports and exports while denouncing protectionism and trade wars.

“We’re 320 million people out of a population of 7 billion,” the Oshkosh Republican said. “That means there’s basically 7 billion people that are markets for our products. Let’s not close those markets off to our products, to our manufacturing workers.”

That, he told a WisPolitics.com breakfast March 21 in Washington, D.C., includes China, who he sees as “a 1.2 billion person potential market” for the U.S. economy.

Johnson also said he wasn’t sold on a border-adjustment tax that could lead to “an awful lot of micro-damage.”

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Under a border-adjustment tax, part of a broader tax reform plan that GOP House leadership is pushing, taxes on imports could be bumped up 20 percent, while leaving exports untouched.

While backers of the tax have said it would encourage companies to produce more products in the U.S. and create more jobs, Johnson was skeptical, saying “really low cost imports” are good for American consumers.

He added that the U.S. economy has fundamentally changed over the past 70 to 100 years, and has become increasingly more productive. Now, he said, it isn’t a good thing for the U.S. economy to produce “very high-labor content products” when other countries could do it cheaper.

"It's actually a bigger conversation than 'exports good, imports bad,'" Johnson said. "And by the way, imports do create a lot of jobs in distribution, transportation, in retail. So unfortunately an awful lot of our conversation with trade is pretty well one-sided, we're not really thinking this thing through."

Johnson, who chairs the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, also weighed in on issues surrounding immigration, saying the solution to securing the U.S.-Mexico border is creating a "functioning and robust" guest worker program.

That, he said, would lessen the number of people crossing the border illegally while still ensuring the dairy industry would have a steady supply of migrant laborers.

He added that immigrants who have come to the U.S. do so because of "the idea and promise of America," and once they arrive, they work hard.

"We know they're [immigrants] working hard," he said. "They're working hard in American dairy."

On Syrian refugees, Johnson said that while he never supported an "outright ban," there was a "way you can do this that makes common sense."

That approach, he said, would involve establishing criteria that starts with allowing in relatives of American citizens, who can then sponsor refugees "so they won't be a drag on our welfare system," as well as women and children, who Johnson said "pose less of a risk."

See more from the breakfast:

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