

Bill Kaplan: Are Wisconsin Republicans fighting for farmers?

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On Wednesday, Trump will be at the airport near Wausau with Wisconsin Republicans, including Governor Scott Walker and U.S. Senate candidate Leah Vukmir. The campaign rally is supposed to help Walker “battling for a third term” and “to shore up the party’s ticket, including its struggling Senate candidate, Leah Vukmir” (New York Times). And, the Washington Post reported: “Some advisers have urged (Trump), without success, not to travel to ... Wisconsin... . The advisers had argued he would be wasting his time, ... Governor Scott Walker ... is likely to lose” Why are Wisconsin Republicans in trouble?

One reason is the Trump-initiated global trade war. Trump unilaterally declared a trade war (high tariffs) against Canada and Mexico, Wisconsin’s top markets for state exports. And, as if a two-front war was not enough, he did the same to China and the European Union. Trump said “trade wars are good and easy to win”. But his reckless tariffs brought retaliation from our trading partners. One hard-hit area is Marathon County, where the Trump rally will be held.

“Wisconsin (Marathon County) is the country’s leading exporter of ginseng (medicinal herb). Wisconsin ginseng farmers have been reeling from a 15 percent tariff (retaliatory) levied on their production by China ...” (U.S. Chamber of Commerce). Ginseng exports, \$30 million (most to China), loom large in Marathon County. “According to one analysis by economists at the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, ginseng production generates \$43 million in local economic activity annually” (Washington Post). However, Trump’s trade war against China is causing ginseng farmers to lose their most important customer. One farm manager said: “I think some fights are worth fighting, and some fights are not worth fighting. ... It seems like it’s all a game to them” (Washington Post).

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Retaliatory tariffs have also left other Wisconsin farmers reeling: corn, cranberries, kidney beans and soybeans. Same story for producers of beef and pork. And, Wisconsin dairy farmers have taken it on the chin, adding to existing economic misery. They were already facing low milk prices, oversupply and increasing competition from large corporate dairy farms. Wisconsin has lost more than 500 dairy farms in the past year. The Trump-touted new U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement will only open up 3.6 percent of the Canadian dairy market. Moreover, dairy farmers probably lost major Mexican customers. Trade wars are easy to start, hard to end, and have lasting adverse consequences.

So what will Wisconsin Republican leaders say to Trump? Walker, supposedly “unintimidated”, has stood moot during Trump’s trade wars. He couldn’t work up a sweat to defend Harley-Davidson from Trump’s hypocritical attacks. And, Vukmir just prattles on how she “trusts” Trump. Worse is 7th District U.S. Congressman Sean Duffy, representing northern Wisconsin, including Marathon County. A cheerleader for Trump, the hot-headed Duffy says our trading partners are engaged in “economic terrorism” with their retaliatory tariffs. However, why not fight for farmers by ending the ill-advised trade wars? Family farms need real assistance to deal with low prices and oversupply.

-Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C. for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 - 2009.