

Bill Kaplan: Cruel betrayal of rural Wisconsin

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A bipartisan group of former leaders of farm groups and U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) officials sent an extraordinary letter to GOP and Democratic leaders of the House and Senate Agriculture Committees: “We are writing today to express our significant concerns about the state of America’s farm economy and the harmful and compounding effect that (Trump) Administration policies are having on our farmers and on the long-term competitiveness of U.S. agriculture. ... Farmer bankruptcies have doubled, barely half of all farms will be profitable this year, and the U.S. is running an historical agriculture trade deficit.”

The signatories included former presidents of the National Corn Growers Association, American Soybean Association (2 largest Wisconsin crops) and Jim Mulhern, past President and CEO, National Milk Producers Federation. Mulhern grew up in Wisconsin and comes from a working class family. He was well-regarded by Democratic and Republican members of Congress. He is a good friend who dedicated his life to helping dairy farmers. The humble and soft-spoken Mulhern is a leading expert on dairy farm problems who worked for bipartisan remedial solutions, e.g., Dairy Margin Coverage Program (insurance), “80 percent of dairy farmers in Wisconsin enrolled ...” (Wisconsin Farm Bureau).

The warning letter, flashing red lights and bells ringing, decried the “current (Trump) Administration actions, along with congressional inaction, (that) have increased costs for farm inputs (trade wars causing higher prices for imported fertilizers and farm machinery parts), disrupted overseas and domestic markets, denied agriculture its reliable labor pool and defunded critical (agriculture) research and staffing.” Wisconsin farmers have mostly lost the China soybean market because of Chinese retaliation against high U.S. tariffs on China. Moreover, our farmers lost domestic markets because the USDA cut over \$1.5 billion that bought food from U.S. farmers for schools and food banks. And, Trump dissolved the Agency for International Development, resulting in U.S. farmers’ losing a \$2.2 billion

market to reduce world hunger.

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Trump finally gave U.S. farmers a \$12 billion bailout, while giving Argentina a \$20 billion bailout! However, U.S. farmers don't want a bailout. As the letter makes clear they want insanity to end: "Immediately exempt all farm inputs from tariffs; repeal tariffs that are disrupting agriculture export markets; (negotiate) binding trade agreements with countries that need our agricultural products and that can help offset other market disruptions; ... pass a new farm bill; pass farm labor reform ... and restore funding for land-grant agriculture research, critical USDA staffing, and domestic and international food aid programs."

It's time for farmers to "raise less corn and more hell." They and their neighbors in rural areas are getting shafted: loss of health care coverage, rural hospitals at risk of closure (12 in Wisconsin) and lack of economic opportunities. Do Republicans even care? For example, Wisconsin 3rd CD GOP Representative Derrick Van Orden serves on the House Agriculture Committee and could prioritize a farm bill that helps small farms, instead of slandering Democratic opponent Rebecca Cooke, who grew up on a dairy farm and led her 4-H club.

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