

# Don't dismiss ag's stake in NAFTA



**Guest Editorial**  
By FRAN O'LEARY

IT'S spring. We're deep into the campaign season, and I have yet to hear much from any of the presidential candidates about their agriculture policies. But they've been doing plenty of saber rattling over renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement. Any changes in it will directly affect farmers.

I don't know how serious any of the presidential candidates are about carrying out what they discuss or promise voters on the campaign trail since, as the saying goes, "the greatest lies are told before the marriage, after the hunt and during an election."

I urge the candidates, in their efforts to woo voters in states that are losing manufacturing jobs, not to make adjustments that would negate hard-won trade gains for U.S. farmers. Since it was signed in January 1994, NAFTA has been good for grain, dairy, pork and beef producers.

## Big dollars

In 2007, U.S. agricultural exports topped \$100 billion. U.S. dairy export value reached just over \$3 billion, up a whopping 61% from a year ago. In the last four months of 2007, exports ran more than double year-earlier levels.

When Democratic presidential hopefuls Senators Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton were campaigning in Ohio and Texas in March, both said if elected they would renegotiate NAFTA in order to protect U.S. manufacturing jobs. They focused more on Mexico than Canada. However, both candidates said they would insist on tougher labor and environmental standards.

Republican presidential candidate Sen. John McCain said renegotiating NAFTA would hurt relations with Canada. In particular, McCain was concerned that the U.S. would lose military support in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper indicated that Canada could respond to an American attempt to renegotiate NAFTA by renegotiating U.S. access to Canadian oil. Canada is the United States' largest oil supplier, ahead of Saudi Arabia. Under NAFTA, Canada cannot cut oil exports to the U.S. unless supplies are also rationed to Canadian consumers by the same amount. Obviously, renegotiating NAFTA would have broad implications to the American economy.

## No easy fixes

Will imposing stronger labor and environmental standards on Mexico help the troubled U.S. manufacturing sector? While this will no doubt push up costs in Mexico, the real competition to our manufacturing sector is from China, India and other countries not under NAFTA. Renegotiating NAFTA will have no impact on goods imported from low-cost suppliers based in China and India. That's a different trade agreement.

Rising global demand and a weakening U.S. dollar have led to record U.S. agricultural exports. While it doesn't

begin to balance the \$700 billion U.S. trade deficit, ag exports do represent a bright spot in our economy

Agreed, we have to do something to help stem the loss of thousands of blue-collar manufacturing jobs from this country. While some of those jobs have gone to Mexico, the lion's share has been lost to China, India and Indonesia. Have you ever had to call your computer manufacturer for technical support to fix your computer? The voice

on the other end of the phone is likely somebody speaking to you from India or China.

We need to do something about our skyrocketing trade deficit. How does any country continue to prosper when we accumulate a \$700 billion a year trade deficit? Doing nothing isn't the answer. But let's not get so carried away tweaking these trade agreements that we end up implementing protectionist policies that diminish the gains we've

made in recent years with ag exports.

The loss of manufacturing jobs is not an Ohio problem or Texas problem; it's a national problem. So we're probably not through hearing about what the candidates plan to do to fix it. Let's hope they have the good sense to keep NAFTA basically intact and not jeopardize the export success U.S. farmers have enjoyed in recent years.

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## Following Refuge Requirements is Essential to Protect Bt Technology

Following Insect Resistance Management (IRM) requirements may take a little extra work, but the long-term benefits of planting a 20 percent refuge are undeniable. And as growers increasingly adopt corn biotech traits such as Monsanto's YieldGard® Rootworm, YieldGard Plus and YieldGard VT Triple® Corn to protect their yields, adhering to IRM requirements helps ensure that the valuable technology will be around for the long term.

Corn grower Rich Bergeson of Ransom, Illinois, who plants biotech corn traits, realizes the importance of following IRM guidelines. "I plant a refuge because I don't want to take the chance of insect resistance," he says. "The technology is valuable, and we don't want to compromise it. Everyone should be doing it."

Bergeson, who farms with his brother and father at Bergeson Bros. Farm, plants his refuge around the perimeter of his biotech corn fields. "We plant it along the end rows and sides of the fields because we tend to drive over those parts anyway," Bergeson explains. To protect those refuge acres, Bergeson uses soil-applied insecticide. "The yields aren't too bad on the refuge acres — about 15 percent to 20 percent less."

According to the USDA, the loss of the technology to insect resistance could cost U.S. farmers billions of dollars through yield reduction and increased pesticide use.

Dr. Kevin Steffey, extension entomologist at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, says that it is in growers' best interest to practice good steward-

ship. He offers the following tips to reduce the chance of developing corn rootworm resistance:

- Throughout the years, corn rootworms have demonstrated an ability to adapt on a wide scale. If refuge requirements are not followed, resistance will eventually develop.
- Transgenic Bt corn hybrids are great insect-control tools, so it is very important to be a good steward by following IRM requirements to ensure that the technology can be used for the long run.
- Pick the refuge planting option that works best for you and your planter. University of Illinois research shows that treating your refuge corn with some kind of insect protection is important to protect against significant yield losses.
- It is very important to follow the refuge distance requirements to make sure there is a mix of insects. The key is to overwhelm a small number of resistant insects with a large number of susceptible ones to minimize the chances of resistance developing.
- Being a good steward of this technology isn't a decision you make just for yourself, it's a decision you make for everyone who uses it. If insect resistance becomes a problem, it eventually becomes everyone's problem.
- For more information on IRM guidelines, growers should check their corn seed bag or consult with their state extension specialists. The NCGA and state corn growers associations are also good sources of information.



For more information, visit [www.NCGA.com](http://www.NCGA.com)

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