

Agriculture Needs Fair Access for Exports

By Dal Grooms

When it comes to balance of trade, U.S. agricultural exports have been in the black for many, many years. A new report from the Agriculture Department predicts U.S. farmers will rise to the task again, putting \$22 billion of black ink onto the spreadsheet in fiscal year 2010.

Perhaps there will be additional opportunities to export not only raw commodities, but value-added ag products through the National Export Initiative introduced by President Barack Obama in his recent State of the Union speech. That initiative is supposed to foster government-wide support for all exports, not just those in agriculture. The result, we're told, will be restoring output and jobs to the U.S. economy.

The president's plan is a three-pronged approach. One of those prongs involves rigorous enforcement of trade laws to help U.S. companies get fair access to foreign markets.

Currently, it's our own Congress that's holding up fair access to three export markets interested in U.S. farm products. The president just needs to move enabling legislation to Congress so we can see how interested our representatives are in supporting export growth.

For three years, Free Trade Agreements with Colombia, Panama and Korea have languished on the desks of Washington, D.C., politicians. It is estimated that U.S. farm exports will increase by about \$3 billion each year after the agreements are ratified by Congress and fully implemented. For 2010, adding the additional value from these new exports would result in a 14 percent increase in the positive balance of trade contributed by U.S. farmers compared to current estimates.

The Korean Free Trade Agreement is the most significant of the three FTAs before the president and Congress. Korea already is the fifth-largest export market for our farm products and the country's ability to buy U.S. farm products continues to grow.

In the case of Colombia and Panama, both are good customers of U.S. farm goods, but Americans must pay very high tariffs to send products to the two countries. However, virtually all Colombian and Panamanian products are shipped duty-free to the U.S. When the FTAs are passed, the playing field will be leveled and tariffs on U.S. products will be eliminated.

This president, and the administration before him, allowed Congress to be the bully in this game. Today, members of the House threaten to hold up and defeat any attempt to move the Free Trade Agreements ahead. Members of Congress have said they don't like the accountability of the Colombian government. Many U.S. farmers are beginning to feel the same about Congress.

Is squashing exports the plan House members have to help the U.S. economy grow again? If so, it's a bad plan.

If the president wants Americans to take his National Export Initiative seriously, then he needs to send the three FTAs to Congress and tell the members it's time to move them through. America's farmers and ranchers have waited long enough.