

NAFTA has made a difference for family farmers, I've seen the changes firsthand

BY CASEY GUERNSEY

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Most kids don't concern themselves with trade relations, commodity prices or interest rates, but such was life for me growing up on my family's dairy farm during the 1980s farm recession. This week, I'm traveling to the nation's capital to share my story with policymakers and thought leaders and help protect rural Americans from reliving that past.

The 1980s brought hard times for my family farm and other operations like ours. A severe drought, costly regulations, restrictive trade policies and a number of other factors created the perfect storm for America's rural communities. While massive farm operations were able to ride out these storms, we were forced to make tough choices just to keep a roof over our heads.

At one point, we were forced to shut off our air conditioning. A cool house was a luxury we simply could not afford. Our priority was keeping our herd healthy and making sure Guernsey Farms lived to see another day.

We were able to make it through this period of uncertainty through hard work and frugality. But not all of our peers were so lucky. Small operations like ours were driven out of the market. And for a farm town like Bethany, Mo., whose economy depends on a vibrant and healthy agriculture industry, the impact on our community – our grocery stores, our banks, our hardware stores – was devastating.

That was, until the 1990s, when better weather, fewer regulations, and the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) ushered in an era of hope and opportunity for America's family farmers.

NAFTA allowed America's producers to access the markets in Canada and Mexico, and small family farms could sell more of our homegrown goods to customers not just in America, but all across the continent. Since NAFTA was signed into law, the American agriculture industry has grown to support 43 million jobs, and helped American farmers export more than \$43 billion to our neighbors to north and south in just one year.

Unfortunately, after more than two decades of progress, farmers are growing increasingly worried that the trade uncertainty we're facing today will turn the clock back to a time when families were forced to not only shut off the air conditioning, but also shut down their life's work.

As trade tensions increase, access to our biggest customers wanes and the window to deliver a new NAFTA deal this year gets even smaller, and many farmers are starting to make consequential financial decisions that will have a major impact on our economy down the road. We have plants in the ground and young cattle grazing on the farm. But without a guarantee that we be able to sell them, we have been forced to cut back on hiring new workers or making investments in our communities.

Large producers and factory farms may be able to weather this uncertainty, but smaller family operations like mine could very well start to disappear if we continue down this path. Put simply, when many of us lose access to critical markets, we lack the resources to keep our doors open.

History has shown us that free trade not only benefits family farmers, it also benefits consumers across the country. I'm hopeful that my story will be able to help influence the conversation around trade and encourage policies that build off the economic progress [President Trump](#) has already made.

Casey Guernsey is a former Missouri state legislator and spokesman for the Americans for Farmers and Families (AFF) coalition's "Retaliation Hurts Rural Families" initiative.