Border War: Sheep Industry Belly-up

The steady decline of independent, family-operated cattle and sheep farms in the United States demands our attention to revitalize this cornerstone of our nation's economy and heritage.

COMMENTARY BY Bill Bullard, CEO, R-CALF USA

major contributor to the ongoing contraction of America's independent, family-scale cattle and sheep farms and ranches can be traced back to the early 90s. It was in 1994 that America deliberately kowtowed to the global elites and struck out blindly on a journey to see how long it would take before the most efficient and productive food production system the world has ever known is rendered unrecognizable. That production system, of course, was America's widely dispersed family farm and ranch system of agriculture.

Globalism was an effective, though sinister process devised by global elites, and its adverse effect could be described as death by a thousand cuts because it was implemented incrementally.

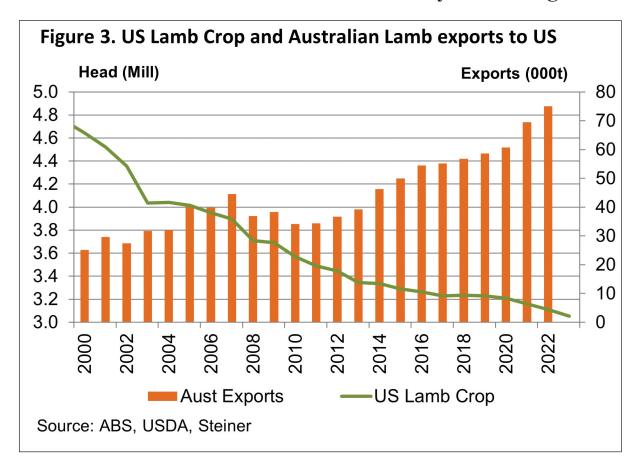
First was the elimination of tariffs on imported commodities, which meant the competitive advantage flowed to whichever nations had lower wages, weaker environmental standards, weaker production standards, and weaker currencies.

Next was the surrendering of our national sovereignty to an international tribunal consisting of unelected and unappointed global officials who could literally cause the United States to abandon Congress' constitutionally passed laws. This happened just a year after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was passed as it was 1995 when the U.S. agreed to be overwatched by the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Then came the unthinkable, and even today many people refuse to believe this really happened. Admittedly, it sounds far-fetched to think that the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) would systematically relax our U.S. food safety standards for no other reason than to help facilitate more and more imports into the United States. But that's exactly what happened.

It was right after entering NAFTA that the USDA finalized a rule to relax our requirements for foreign meat inspection systems. Since 1995, the U.S. no longer requires foreign meat inspection systems to be "at least equal to" the United States meat inspection system. Now foreign inspection systems need only be close to our U.S. system, under a relaxed equivalency standard.

Two years later, in 1997, the U.S. lifted its restrictions on countries with ongoing



disease outbreaks under what is called "regionalization." Under this scheme, foreign countries with ongoing disease problems can carve out regions within their boundaries where the dangerous disease has not yet been detected and it can export meat to the United States sourced from these carved-out regions.

And then a few years later, in 2004, the U.S. concluded that it wasn't fair to foreign countries for the U.S. to continue conducting monthly on-site inspections of foreign meat packing plants that export meat to the U.S. So, monthly inspections of foreign meat packing plants have ceased and the U.S. is now conducting only periodic inspections.

And then remember when the USDA assured Americans that the U.S. food supply was safe because the U.S. prohibited the importation of beef and beef products anywhere that BSE or mad cow disease was known to exist. Well, that too was relaxed in 2005 even while Canada and other countries that export beef to the United States were continuing to experience outbreaks of the classical form of BSE.

So globalism means this to our domestic food production and food safety: U.S. cattle and sheep farmers and ranchers are forced to compete on an unlevel playing field, with the advantage going to countries that don't have to comply with America's economic and environmental cost structures.

And it means that the U.S. can no longer maintain its more stringent food safety, food inspection, and disease mitigation standards that the United States deemed reasonable and necessary right up to and until it fell under the globalists' spell. Globalism, as exemplified by NAFTA, was an abject failure on its economic, environmental, food safety, and disease protection fronts.

But wait a minute! Wasn't NAFTA renegotiated to become what is now the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement or USMCA? Indeed, some of it was, but not the provisions impacting cattle and sheep producers. Today's USMCA provisions for American cattle and sheep farmers and ranchers were unchanged during the NAFTA renegotiation process.

And that means the dismantling of our widely dispersed and independent family-scale farm and ranch system of agriculture that began under NAFTA continues through today.

So, urge your members of Congress to reverse the failed NAFTA and USMCA. If you're looking for a place to start, tell them to pass mandatory country of origin labeling for beef (MCOOL) so consumers can at least choose under what countries' food safety system they want their beef and lamb produced.