

U.S. farmers were already struggling to turn a profit. Trump's trade war will make that harder

By Frank Morris | April 21, 2025

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Glenn Brunkow feeds sheep on his farm near Wamego, Kansas. His sheep and cattle are profitable these days, but he's worried about losing money on his corn and soybean crops this year.

Photo: Frank Morris / Harvest Public Media

The U.S. trade war with China is coming at a tough time for American farmers, who are already dealing with lower crop prices and higher costs for farm necessities. Tariffs are likely to push crop prices further down, while increasing the costs for fertilizer and farm equipment.

The last few years have been eventful for farmers — not in a good way.

"It's a pretty tough time," said Glenn Brunkow, who grows corn and soybeans near Westmorland, Kansas. "This is about as grim of a time as I've seen for crop production. Nothing looks like it's going to make money right now."

That's mainly because the prices for farm necessities have risen much faster than the price of the soybeans and corn that Brunkow grows. The cost of big tractors is up close to 300% over 30 years, according to Farm Credit Services of America, far outstripping inflation. Supply chain issues have also pushed prices up for other farm inputs like fertilizer and diesel fuel. In recent years, dry conditions have cut production in parts of the Great Plains and Midwest.

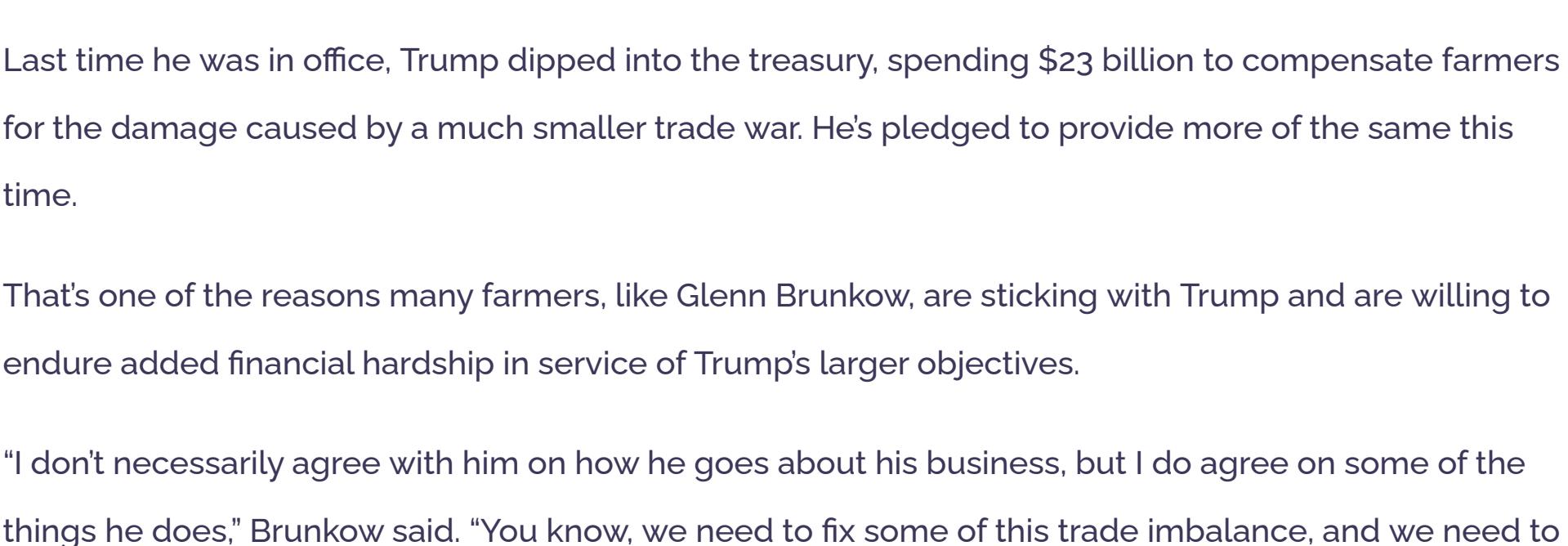
Now the trade war threatens to make everything bad about the farm economy worse.

"We're already stressed, and this doesn't help," said Brunkow.

Until recently, China was buying about a quarter of the U.S. soybean crop. But, when Trump slapped a 145% tax on Chinese imports, China struck back with a 135% tariff on U.S. soybeans, all but closing off Brunkow's biggest export market.

Meantime, Trump's import taxes are starting to exacerbate inflation on farm equipment.

"It means we hold on to stuff. We fix things instead of trading them off and just make do with what we have," said Brunkow.



Doug Meinhardt is the parts program manager at KanEquip, a chain of farm equipment dealerships primarily in Kansas. He's been in the farm equipment business for more than 50 years. He remembers the 1980's farm crisis and says it could happen again.

Frank Morris/Harvest Public Media

They're feeling that kind of sentiment at KanEquip dealership a few miles south of Brunkow's place in Wamego, Kansas. Parts Program Manager Doug Meinhardt has noticed parts prices jerking skyward faster than normal, and he's bracing for big price hikes on heavy equipment.

"All the small tractors are made overseas. The medium-sized tractors are made in Europe. All the smaller ones are made over in Asia," Meinhardt said, "and that's all going to have tariffs on it, I'm sure."

Even though the biggest, most sophisticated farm tractors are built in the U.S., that's generally with imported steel and electronics, now subject to tariffs.

Meinhardt said the 1980s farm crisis triggered the shakeout in the tractor industry, consolidating production under a handful of global corporations that divvied it up across three continents. Back then, sky-high operating costs and low crop prices drove thousands of U.S. farmers under. Meinhardt is old enough to remember the toll that took on his industry.

"A lot of equipment manufacturers and dealers went out of business in the '80s, too. And it could happen again," said Meinhardt.



Louise and Vance Ehmke, married 53 years, farm land his ancestors homesteaded in 1885 near Dighton, Kansas. They are big, successful farmers, but they're deeply worried about the trade war.

Frank Morris/Harvest Public Media

A sense of foreboding is widespread this spring.

"There's a whole bunch of things that are happening at the same time, and none of them are good," said Vance Ehmke, who grows wheat, rye, and a forage crop called triticale in western Kansas.

Ehmke believes that U.S. agriculture was in recession before the trade war. Now farmers' exports are threatened by retaliatory tariffs. Trump issued a post on his Truth Social social media platform last month telling farmers to get ready to sell more food "INSIDE" the U.S.

Ehmke said that just shows Trump doesn't understand agriculture.

"Here in Kansas, we grow, say, 400 million bushels of wheat. Half of that has got to be exported," said Ehmke. "I cannot eat two loaves of bread a day. That won't work. We've got to export that to somebody."

U.S. farmers have spent decades carefully nurturing lucrative trade relationships with foreign buyers.

Ehmke thinks Trump's trade policies treat valued customers like wild west outlaws.

"We built up these trade relationships with China, Canada, Mexico, for instance, three very important countries to us, and we have sent them a message to 'get the hell out of Dodge! Take your business someplace else,'" Ehmke said. "Go down to Brazil and buy your soybeans and your corn down there!"

Last time he was in office, Trump dipped into the treasury, spending \$23 billion to compensate farmers for the damage caused by a much smaller trade war. He's pledged to provide more of the same this time.

That's one of the reasons many farmers, like Glenn Brunkow, are sticking with Trump and are willing to endure added financial hardship in service of Trump's larger objectives.

"I don't necessarily agree with him on how he goes about his business, but I do agree on some of the things he does," Brunkow said. "You know, we need to fix some of this trade imbalance, and we need to lock the borders down. But sometimes I wish we'd use a scalpel instead of a hammer."

This story was produced in partnership with [Harvest Public Media](#), a collaboration of public media newsrooms in the Midwest. It reports on food systems, agriculture and rural issues.

TAGS: [farmers](#), [President Donald Trump](#), [tariffs](#), [trade war](#)

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