

Matt Harris: Port's labor negotiation process needs reform

Matt Harris

Members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union West Coast Longshoremen have overwhelmingly voted to ratify a tentative contract agreement reached in February with employers represented by the Pacific Maritime Association.

Although the ratification of the agreement has led to a return to normal port operations, it is set to expire on July 1, 2019. This short-term labor contract does not give assurances to family farms in Washington, or to their international export customers, that a repeat of the recent port slowdown will not occur just four short years from now.

West Coast port congestion began appearing as early as July 2014, with the slowdown in productivity reaching its most substantial levels during the four-month period beginning in October and lasting into March.

Washington is one of the most trade-dependent states in the nation. Nearly 40 percent of all jobs are tied to exports of goods and services. This means the slowdown had a very large ripple effect throughout every corner of the state. However, nowhere else was this impact felt more than within our local farming communities. As farmers lost sales that will never be regained, many other community members saw firsthand how a few hundred union workers and a handful of shipping companies based in Seattle and Tacoma cost their towns and counties millions in lost revenue.

The stalemate between both groups seemingly carried on without any helpful intervention. The Obama administration's hands were tied, even though the logistical stress created by the ILWU and PMA threatened the economy and ultimately cost the U.S. economy billions of dollars. However unfathomable it may seem, there is no protection of the rights of the public when negotiations stall and a slowdown occurs. As such, between now and July 2019 congressional action is needed to modify how negotiations occur between the ILWU and PMA.

The aftermath of the West Coast port slowdown is massive, and some Washington family farms will never recover. In just one example of this impact, the port slowdown in Tacoma and Seattle cost state potato businesses and farms over \$50 million in lost sales that cannot be recaptured, demoralizing rural families.

Recently, it has been reported that most, if not all, port congestion has been cleared. Some normality is returning to farm communities around the state, but we all have paid the price of watching a bulletproof negotiation process unfold.

Now what? Family farms, local businesses and large Washington companies employing hundreds of thousands continue to live with the game of "contract chicken" played by the PMA and ILWU until Congress helps with smart legislation to correct a decades-old problem. Our hope is we will see a better solution before 2019.

Matt Harris is the assistant executive director of the Washington State Potato Commission.