

# TCPALM

## **Presidential candidates vary on sugar price supports**

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Sugar almost always gets its way in Washington, so it was news when Texas Sen. Ted Cruz called for an end to price supports for the industry and former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush said through intermediaries that he'd like to see the program phased out.

That puts them at odds with Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, whose long-standing support of the sugar industry has won him the backing of the Republican-supporting wing of the Palm Beach sugar baron Fanjul family and its Florida Crystals Corp.

Florida Crystals and a related Fanjul company have contributed \$200,000 to the super political action committee Conservative Solutions backing Rubio, records show. Jose "Pepe" Fanjul was there when Rubio announced his candidacy in April and he and his son, Pepito, have hosted two fundraisers since.

"I'm not going to wipe out an American industry that happens to have a lot of workers in Florida by unilaterally disarming," Rubio said last month.

Rubio's position that ending the program might have national security implications has been ridiculed by conservative critics of the program, including the National Review, The Wall Street Journal and free-market think tanks such as the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation. Cruz calls the sugar program "corporate welfare."

### **FUZZY STANCE**

Records released by Bush's independent Super PAC Right to Rise USA showed the organization received \$505,000 from the U.S. Sugar Corp. of Clewiston in the first six months of this year. The contributions initially were reported as coming from the company's charitable trust but the error was corrected. Right to Rise spokesman Paul Lindsay did not respond to an email message seeking additional information and U.S. Sugar spokeswoman Judy Sanchez did not return phone messages.

Florida Sugar Cane League Executive Vice President Ryan Weston, based in Washington, doesn't see much daylight between Rubio's position and the one he believes Bush still holds, and wondered whether Bush spokeswoman Kristy Campbell, who told The Washington Post he favors "a phaseout of the program," was quoted out of context.

In answers on a questionnaire, Weston said, "Gov. Bush talked about his preference would be to get rid of all subsidies on commodities that are traded around the world but it did not say to get rid of U.S. subsidies before other countries get rid of their subsidies.

"Gov. Bush has supported farmers in Florida. He's supported sugar farmers in Florida when he was governor. As far as I know, his position is still the same: He would not get rid of U.S. farm policies first before other countries agreed to get rid of their policies, I assume just like Sen. Rubio is saying," Weston said.

The Bush campaign did not respond to requests to clarify his position.

## HEAVY LOBBYING

The sugar program operates by having both consumers and taxpayers subsidize the industry, keeping prices high by limiting imports of cheaper foreign sugar and guaranteeing a minimum price that's typically twice the world price of sugar. That also makes visits to the grocery store for confections like candy and cakes more expensive, critics contend. The sugar industry defends the program by pointing to price-distorting subsidies offered by foreign governments to their domestic sugar growers.

If Bush has had a change of heart about sugar in particular, some contend his position might have been influenced by a sugar substitute, high-fructose corn syrup, and its supporters in the early caucus state of Iowa.

The program also operates so that if the market price is below the guaranteed price, sugar growers can dump it on the U.S. Department of Agriculture in repayment of production loans. Surplus government-owned sugar is sold to ethanol producers at a discount. The program has plenty of critics and is always a target for legislative reform but it continues in part because, last year alone, five sugar industry-related groups spent \$8.3 million on lobbying. The industry also bankrolls political campaigns, ensuring loyalty. Many upper Midwest members of Congress have sugar beet farmers among their constituents.

## HISTORIC STANCES

Other candidates whose campaigns were asked for positions on the U.S. Sugar Program did not respond to phone or email messages, including Republicans Donald Trump, Rick Santorum, Carly Fiorina, John Kasich, Chris Christie and Rand Paul and Democrats Hillary Clinton, Martin O'Malley and Bernie Sanders.

But some positions can be inferred through their histories on the issue. For example, Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul co-sponsored S. 685, the Free Sugar Act of 2011, that would have prohibited sugar price supports and ended quota controls. In what might appear to be ancient history, Ohio Gov. but then-U.S. Rep. John Kasich in 1999 said he opposed sugar subsidies, according to an Associated Press story.

Even more remote, Santorum, in 1995, as a freshman senator from Pennsylvania, home of Hershey chocolates, tried to take on Big Sugar from a perch in the Agriculture Committee, and lost.

"The Senate Agriculture Committee is not the place to get reform in agricultural issues," he said at the time. "I found that out."

Fiorina talks of "crony capitalism" in her stump speech but doesn't single out sugar.

Vermont Sen. Sanders, seeking the Democratic nomination, has voted for Farm Bills of which the sugar program was part but also, more tellingly, was one of 53 senators voting against an amendment offered by Sen. Pat Toomey, R-Pa., in 2012, that would have reformed the sugar program.

Former Maryland Gov. O'Malley's campaign did not respond to a request to state his position on the sugar program. His brother, Peter O'Malley, an adviser to his Baltimore mayoral and gubernatorial campaigns and a former chairman of the Maryland Democratic Party, is a corporate vice president at American Sugar Refining Group/Domino Sugar.

Hillary Clinton's campaign also did not respond to requests to discuss sugar policy. She was a New York senator campaigning for president in June 2008 when the Farm Bill and its sugar provisions came up for a floor vote. Then-Sen. Barack Obama was also absent for that vote.

But in a perhaps-telling footnote in the history of her husband's administration captured in the Starr Report, Monica Lewinsky told investigators the president took a February 1996 call from the prominent Democrat-backing Alphonso Fajul, Pepe's brother, while she was present in the Oval Office. Fajul was calling to complain about a proposal former Vice President Al Gore had announced hours earlier to charge Florida sugar growers a penny a pound to clean polluted water in Everglades National Park. After the 22-minute phone call, the penny a pound proposal was quietly dropped.

Pepe Fajul was serving as Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole's finance chairman that year.