

Republican presidential candidates court Idaho's mega-donor

KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Idaho isn't known for attracting political powerhouses during presidential races. However, what it lacks in clout, it makes up for being home to one of the GOP's wealthiest donors.

Frank VanderSloot, founder and CEO of health care products company Melaleuca based in Idaho Falls, was a critical fundraiser for former Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney's campaign during the 2012 election. Now he's being courted by GOP presidential candidates eager to benefit from VanderSloot's successful fundraising reputation.

"It was surely a lot easier four years ago," he told The Associated Press. "There was a clear front runner to get behind. Romney was head and shoulders above the rest of the field ... I surely have who I think will be the best president in my mind. But the question is, can they get elected? If they can't get elected, you're just wasting your time, aren't you?"

Securing VanderSloot's backing would be a valuable boost to any campaign. For example, VanderSloot gave at least \$1 million to a political action committee supporting Romney. He also served as one of Romney's national campaign finance co-chairs, raising \$2 million and \$5 million.

"You're looking at a major player in GOP politics. He has tremendous ability to exert influence," said David Adler, former director of the Andrus Center for Public Policy at Boise State University. "He can lift someone from the middle of the pack and put them out in front."

VanderSloot says that five candidates out of the crowded Republican field have caught his eye, including his favorites Florida Sen. Marco Rubio, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker and former business executive Carly Fiorina.

Also on his short list is former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who VanderSloot praised for being articulate and having the resources to raise campaign dollars. And while he believes the hype surrounding Donald Trump will eventually fade, VanderSloot said he supports the businessman's ability to resonate with the public by kicking political correctness to the wind.

"(Trump) is such a breath of fresh air. But it's not about what he's done, what's his motive? He's always been it if for Trump and he will always be in it for Trump first," VanderSloot said.

Two of VanderSloot's favored candidates, Bush and Rubio, have made campaign stops in Idaho this year. Separately, Republican hopeful and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul swung by Idaho during his Western states tour, making speeches in four different cities.

"If Paul wins the nomination, we'll see a Democrat in the White House," VanderSloot. "He is far down on our list."

Yet VanderSloot says the uptick in presidential candidates coming through Idaho marks a stark difference in the state's influence compared to four years ago. He pointed to Idaho's Republican dominated Statehouse passing legislation earlier this year that will move the state's GOP primary presidential election from May to March as a critical point in Idaho evolving as a political player in future elections. Before, the presidential nominee had often been determined before Idaho had even voted.

"Idaho has 32 delegates, which is more than Iowa and New Hampshire," said David Johnston, executive director of the Idaho Republican Party. "People sometimes forget that delegates are key in a primary election, and Idaho will be a hot prize in that."

Johnston added that he wouldn't be surprised if more Republican presidential candidates visited Idaho before the primary election.

VanderSloot's involvement in presidential races hasn't been without pushback. In 2012, President Barack Obama's campaign listed VanderSloot as one of eight Romney donors having questionable and less-than-reputable records. Shortly afterward, the Internal Revenue Service and U.S. Department of Labor subjected the mega-donor to two federal audits.

The criticism has spurred VanderSloot to be more open and vocal about whom he supports — a resolution he encourages other donors to adopt.

"We will be more financial active than the last election," he said. "Shame on them for trying to stop us from speaking out."

VanderSloot said he isn't running away and wants to set an example.

"This year we're more interested than ever in helping people get their message out," he said.