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Sent: Wednesday, December 16, 2009 9:47 AM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Tell the Justice Department What You Think About Corporate Control of Our Food!

Thank you for providing this opportunity for the American people to weigh in on agribusiness and what can be implemented to keep current and future generations safe. I am a gardener/parent/community member and I am very concerned about the consolidation of corporate power in the agricultural sector. It is an unsustainable system that affects local farmers, local economies and the nations environment.

My first concern with the American agribusiness system lies with the farmers and their individual economic livelihoods. Under the current system of government subsidies, farmers have found that an industrialized model of farming is the only way for them to survive (Manning, Richard 2004). Currently the richest 2% of farmers account for 35% of farm sales and receive 27% of the federal farm subsidies (Manning, Richard 2004). Most large scale farming operations, by their very definition, consolidate operations to central locations, drawing economic opportunity from several smaller locales in the process. This means that farmers have had to travel for work rather than sow it in their own fields. If agricultural incentives brought smaller scale farming back to the local level, jobs could be first preserved, then created and would help to prop up the local economy. With the majority of farmland concentrated in a minority of hands, this is not a current reality (Roberts, Paul 2008). Farmers need to work in the communities in which they live.

Aside from the obvious benefits of keeping workers money in a local economy, American agribusiness has greater economic motivation. Food-borne illness outbreaks have greatly affected the United States in past years. Currently, if an E. coli strain contaminates a spinach harvest, as it did in the fall of 2006, the entire nation is liable to become infected with E. coli (Roberts, Paul 2008). Local production of food allows for more farmer control of the crop and harvests, as well as more nutritious foods and less consumer safety concerns. If production were brought back down to the local level, outbreaks of this manner would only affect the surrounding community and would not become so widespread so quickly.

Another issue I take with the current model of agribusiness and large scale concentration of agricultural power is the effect on our environment. Large scale agricultural operations are often times more concerned with the bottom line than what effects they are having on air, water and land quality. Just as they consolidate operations to a single location, many of the largest agribusinesses focus their production on growing monoculture commodity crops. Monoculture crops fields are not natural and require many more times the amount of resources that poly-culture crop fields do. Taking crops out of their natural habitat and growing massive quantities of one particular species brings with it complications: water management becomes an issue, as does pest management (Tanksley, Steven D.). Creating an unnatural situation for these crops is not a sustainable situation and therefore jeopardizes our environment because of the reallocation of water, the soil amendments needed and the application of pesticides that ultimately end up in our ground water and water tables. Again, a greater emphasis on local production by local farmers would alleviate this problem.

As a concerned citizen I would like to see more incentives for small farmers, as well as more federal programs initiated to encourage more people to come back to the land. I know through personal experience that there are many people among us who would truly enjoy an opportunity to farm and grow healthy food as their livelihood. However, the current policies and agricultural structure do not favor the small farmer. More federal money needs to be made available to individuals and small organizations interested in creating a

secure and sustainable food production in their respective communities. Recently, I was able to attend a talk given by Will Allen, founder of Growing Power, Inc. I realized how much we already know about urban and small scale farming and how unfavorable the current policies are in this arena. Will Allen has implemented urban gardens that are producing in very unusual places, such as abandoned parking lots. These are missed opportunities that must be harnessed for the good of our nation. If we know how to grow healthy, sustainable foods already, why doesnt the government support this? In the long run it would not only serve the under-served neighborhoods, but it would also raise healthier, more vibrant citizens. Unfortunately, the concentration of agricultural power in a few corporate hands is not allowing this. I feel that if power could be more equally distributed, we might see monumental changes, not only in the agricultural sector, but in the lives and livelihoods of all Americans.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity to express my opinion on this truly important issue.

Sincerely,
Rachel T. Russell