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Sent: Tuesday, December 29, 2009 6:56 PM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Farmers deserve fair markets

I have a BS in Agriculture from the University of Delaware. I am well aware of the pit-falls of having American Agriculture under the umbrella of Corporate giants. It's a very dangerous game to play especially with the push to grow genetically modified plants and animals. GMOs are not hybrids, they are the result of mutating the genetic material. As a scientist and student of Agriculture, I can't think of a scarier precedent than having our food supply controlled by corporations whose main function and bottom line is gross profitability instead of the bigger picture which is keeping our food supply healthy and safe!!!

Support of lack of competition is approval of monopolies. Historically, America has had the sense to encourage healthy competition. It keeps consumer prices down, encourages education and fresh ideas and, in this case, provides a way to preserve healthy food choices. It is not a wonder to me that we have seen a horrific increase in disease in this country. "You are what you eat." It's absolutely true. Sound nutrition is the core of good health. Immense corporate farming has stripped the land of valuable nutrients, introduced genetic mutations into the food chain, destroyed many families of farmers, has eaten up the countryside with hundreds of thousands of acres of dangerous mono-cultures, and has driven the price of basic healthy food items out of the reach of American families, the core of our work force and economic base.

How long do you think we can survive as a country if we continue to destroy the health of it's citizenry? That's really the big issue here. Gargantuan corporations such as Monsanto, et. al., don't care as long as their profit margins support huge salaries and bonuses for the CEO's. Hopefully, we have learned that our infra-structure can only exist if we step up to bat and always do the right thing. The ball is in your court. I implore you to support competition in American Agriculture. Without healthy food choices and good nutrition this society will fall into decay. It's as simple as that.

Next year's Department of Justice and USDA hearings are a sorely-needed first step to address concentration of ownership in American agriculture. These hearings should address the broad implications of anti-competitive practices. A combination of vigorous enforcement, regulation, and legislation will be needed to restore competition and level the playing field.

Our food supply, from seed to grocery store shelf, essentially belongs to a handful of companies. As a result, prices are rising, research and innovation are restricted, fair contracts are difficult to negotiate, and farmers' and consumers' choices are limited. The problem is worsening. The effects of concentration are widespread, from seed research to meat processing.

-Costs of seed and other inputs are rising to historic highs while the prices farmers receive are falling.

-Farmers are losing their right to save seed, and independent seed companies are disappearing. More than 200 have disappeared since 1996.

-Farmers do not have the explicit right to bargain collectively, which they need in order to level the playing field and negotiate fair contracts.

-Patents and licensing agreements severely restrict plant breeders' and researchers' access to genetic material and prevent researchers from testing existing varieties.

-Programs at public universities are increasingly dependent on funding from private companies instead of public funds. As a result, publicly-owned breeds are dwindling, and innovation is declining.

-Manufacturers of GE crops are not held liable for contamination of farmers' crops. In fact, farmers are held liable, even when the GE content provides no economic benefit.

-Contracts often leave farmers with little financial or legal control over their situations and take away their right to privacy.

-The Packers and Stockyards Act prohibits unfair practices in the poultry industry, but it is rarely enforced because enforcement authority is split between the USDA and the Justice Department.

-Lack of regional competition and tacit collusion between poultry companies restrict contract farmers' options.

-The ranking system for contract poultry farmers is not based on true competition, and farmers who lose poultry contracts are not able to recapture their initial investments.

American farmers and consumers deserve an open and fair marketplace. Family farmers, independent companies, and public research are vital to the future of agriculture. These hearings can be an important step as the Justice Department and the USDA work to restore fairness and competition. Please use them to correct these concerns.

Sincerely,