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Sent: Wednesday, December 30, 2009 9:52 AM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Comments Regarding Agriculture and Antitrust Enforcement Issues in Our 21st Century Economy

To Whom It May Concern:

I am a mother and a rural- and urban-development worker, working with low income families and farmer helping them to access services to improve their family's health and their overall well-being. I am deeply concerned about corporate consolidation in the agricultural, processing, and supermarket sectors, as I see its repercussions every day in my work, my choices as a shopper and as a person whose child will be benefiting from the state- and federally-funded school lunch program.

Prices are rising at the supermarket. Meanwhile, I know that farmers are struggling on the other end of this chain -- and that the large food companies which stand in the middle have made record profits this year, and also did last year during the food crisis.

There is no reason why food that travels from a great distance (averaging 1500 mi, by many estimates) and is highly processed should cost less than less processed foods coming from farms in my local region. I know that large food companies lobby heavily to keep the commodity subsidy system in place, so that they may continue to benefit directly from our tax dollars by being able to buy raw materials (like corn) at below the cost of production to use in making beef, cereal, chips, soda, and a host of other items that we then pay dearly for. This is a serious issue: local farms are going out of business, and rural communities are becoming ghost towns because small farmers can't compete with the artificially low prices set by industrial farms and consolidated buyers.

There are certainly real benefits to efficiency and centralization in some sectors of the economy, but transporting tomatoes or beef or milk across the country -- when much of it could be done just as well more regionally -- doesn't make sense. Again, on the farmer side of things, small food producers and processors are having an increasingly harder time finding markets for their products due to marketing channels becoming ever more consolidated and controlled by fewer hands.

Related to this, on my end of things, when I really consider what is available to buy to eat, there is very little diversity in materials used to make the food - everything seems to be made from corn or soy. To me, this says a lot about how the vertically integrated systems controlled by relatively few players have been able to tie up the value of the system in their own hands and essentially control what we put into our bodies. The profit structure and incentives of large corporations are at direct odds with positive nutritional and health objectives set by the USDA. As food and agricultural corporations have grown and consolidated, their lobbies have become ever more powerful, ultimately influencing every aspect of US agricultural policy -- with consequences that are detrimental to public health. It makes my blood boil that my tax dollars subsidize the production of corn syrup which is significantly contributing to the obesity crisis -- which is then requiring even more of my tax dollars to address.

Overall, food seems less safe, and there seems to be very little accountability built into the system,

which is dangerous when things are as consolidated as they are. There are more and vaster recalls going on, affecting huge swaths of the country, often because meat and vegetables are processed in big centralized locations. The squalid conditions that cows, chickens, and pigs are being raised in on huge industrial feedlots no doubt contributes to this. While this is bad from an environmental standpoint, it is frightening to consider how easy it is to grow pathogens in crowded conditions and how hard it is to control their spread when such large numbers of animals are pushed through one factory each day. A band-aid approach to this has been the widespread use of antibiotics in animals - 70% of antibiotics used in this country are as NON-therapeutic, but preventive, use in farm animals - which promotes the development of antibiotic-resistant strains which could pose a huge public health threat.

A less-centralized system of food production would increase accountability by cutting out many steps in the chain of actors from farm to table, and make inevitable accidents much less lethal - many fewer people would be affected. I would further argue that smaller livestock processing plants would create less accidents as things move slower and there is more ability to ensure health and safety of the product.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to your work on this important matter. I look forward to following the hearings process in the coming year.

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