

From: Bill Ayres <bill@whyhunger.org>
Sent: Wednesday, December 30, 2009 2:31 PM
To: ATR-Agricultural Workshops <agriculturalworkshops@usdoj.gov>
Subject: Agriculture and Antitrust Enforcement Issues in Our 21st-Century Economy

Dear Attorney General Holder and Secretary Vilsack:

On behalf of the nonprofit hunger advocacy organization World Hunger Year (WHY), I respectfully submit the following comments to the US Department of Justice and US Department of Agriculture on Agriculture and Antitrust Enforcement Issues in Our 21st-Century Economy (74 Fed. Reg. 165 43725-43726). WHY commends the US Departments of Justice and Agriculture for soliciting public comments and convening hearings on the impact of food and agriculture industry concentration on consumers, farmers, and the marketplace. Thank you for this opportunity to share our concerns.

For the past 35 years, WHY has been a leading advocate for innovative, community-based solutions to hunger and poverty. Thousands of people in need of emergency food call our National Hunger Hotline annually, and we work with an extensive network of grassroots partners around the country who are finding innovative solutions to end hunger and poverty in their communities.

A common theme we hear from all angles of our work is the lack of control that most people feel over their food. We work with farmers who are being squeezed out of the marketplace or can't get a fair price for what they produce and with farmworkers and food workers who are drastically undercompensated, and frequently exploited, for their labor. We hear, too, from the increasing numbers of consumers who cannot afford adequate food to feed themselves and their families, let alone access fresh, healthy foods that are important for good nutrition. An overabundance of poor-quality foods and a lack of access to good food is driving a pandemic of obesity and diet-related diseases that is costing lives and making all of us sick, including our children. Meanwhile, the best of the American tradition has been lost -- we are a country built on small businesses and entrepreneurship, but "small" can no longer compete in the food and agriculture sector.

Fortunately, positive models from across the country demonstrate that we already have the solutions to these problems. Communities from the Bronx to Detroit, central Iowa to Oakland, and Milwaukee to Mississippi are showing that it is possible to build thriving local and regional food systems that create good jobs, strengthen local economies, and broaden access to food that is healthy and affordable. These are models that work, but they are small, and so they cannot compete. Efforts to scale up these positive solutions are met with opposition by a small number of corporations that would prefer to maintain the status quo, and thus we have markets that favor large-scale corporate agriculture, entire chains of production controlled by a single corporation, seeds owned by companies rather than by growers -- and only limited ways to get healthy, regionally produced, fresh food to the plates of those most at risk of hunger or diet-related illness.

We believe that it is time for the government to take a bold, positive step towards curbing hunger and the other injustices of our current food system by implementing measures that safeguard against excessive corporate concentration and that promote fair, competitive markets.

Thank you again for this opportunity to weigh in on this important matter. We hope that the hearings process will continue to solicit input from consumers and citizens. We look forward to following the investigation in the coming year.

Sincerely,

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