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Microsoft Word document  
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“Comments Regarding Agriculture and Antitrust Enforcement Issues in Our 21st Century Economy”

I offer these views on concentration in agribusiness with cynicism formed by 33 years of family farm activism, seeing countless efforts to influence countless secretaries of agriculture, presidents of the United States, and members of Congress of both parties to put the interests of family farmers and the environment ahead of agribusiness blind appetite for profit.

I know there have been members of Congress that assured their vote-gathering among farmers by railing against big agribusiness and saying that anti-trust laws should be enforced and even that big corporations should be broken up. Hearings and studies were the only concrete outcomes of this rhetorical political engineering. Nary a word of the real concerns or proposals would be delivered outside of the home districts, and token pieces of legislation would not move one inch through the hoops of Congress.

One the other hand, I would like to challenge some of the thinking of farm groups that often speak out against concentration, because I believe it is based on faulty economic thinking and unproductive solutions.

First of all, if today's level of concentration—the greatest ever—is today's problem, how do you explain all the raw deals farmers received in past years when there was much more competition in meat packing, retailing, food processing, etc? Let's say well meaning proposals for breaking up the monopolies were solicited by our government, what level of competition would be ideal? Even if some improvement in market returns to farmers resulted, would that be enough?

Secondly, while I think its obvious big corporations scheme to eliminate competition and collude to short change farmers and ranchers at one end and consumers at the other, I believe concentration can be the result of other forces that need to be addressed. More transparency is required in corporate behavior and enforcement of regulations by a democratic government more powerful and more dedicated to the common good than the corporations. Otherwise, even after a break up, the most ruthless, irresponsible corporations will pursue industrial processes that put all their competitors—and particularly ethical individual business people—at a competitive disadvantage. Likewise, if our agricultural policy leaves in place an unpopulated rural landscape, with economic opportunity only in giant metro areas, mass marketing will win the day over small regional companies leading to their demise. I believe a lot of the consolidation of companies in the past has been a result of this urbanizing lopsided development which extinguished local and regional markets.

A major question is how cheap will we allow feedstuffs for livestock to be produced or imported? If the goal of the farm bill and trade policy is to provide cheap feedstuffs for industrial livestock feed, livestock will be produced in giant feedlots or factories at prices less than a responsible, self-contained family farm with good practices and crop rotations can possibly match. At the same time, such a policy would obviously leave the crop production to ever increasingly industrial crop farms specializing in feed grains and oilseeds, or even huge industrial plantations in South America, the US Midwest, Africa, and Asia that no more operate under market forces than the agricultural system of the Soviet Union. One example of plantation farming without farmers is currently being conducted in Brazil by a US farm cooperative! According to the slick newsletter from my

regional coop, CHS, a joint venture has been formed by CHS with a Japanese company and a Brazilian company to buy 400,000 acres in Brazil (including virgin land) to produce corn, soybeans and cotton for export. No farmers will be involved, just 600 employees. I have no doubt that this model is already sprouting here in the Midwest.

In conclusion, we US citizens have a choice: either accept an economic future being dictated by the selfish interest of corporate managers and stockholders, with extreme disparities of wealth and power, with the environment destroyed on all continents, or demand a really democratic government more powerful and dedicated to the common good than soulless, heartless corporations. This will not always mean everybody's standard of living will be better than what we've experienced in the past, but it may mean a sustainable global society, where every person's dignity and opinions are as important as everyone else.